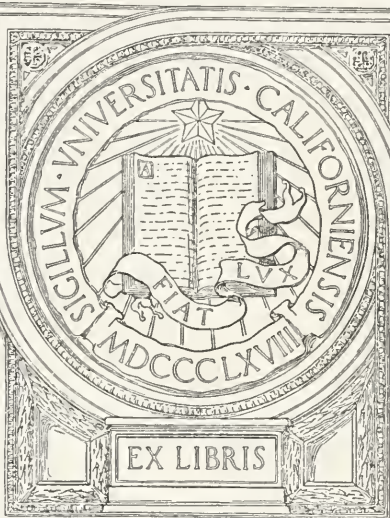


Studies  
of A  
Booklover

—  
PROFESSOR  
T. M. Parrott

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
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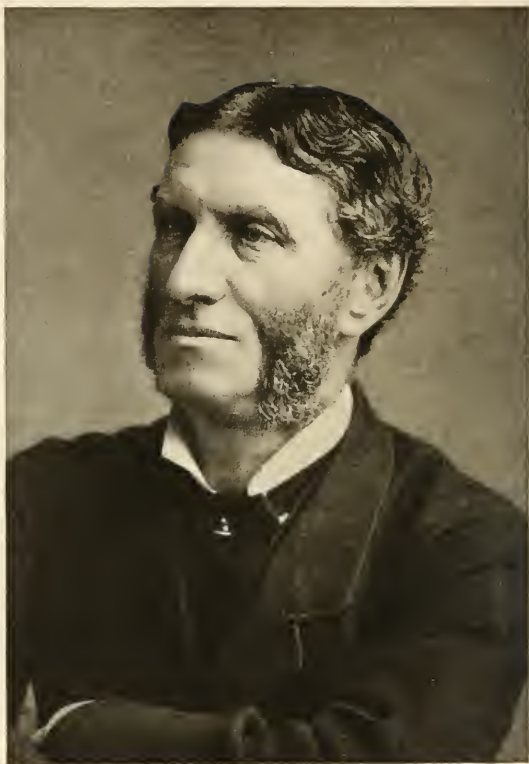




# STUDIES OF A BOOKLOVER







*Matthew Arnold*

STUDIES  
OF A  
BOOKLOVER

BY  
THOMAS MARC PARROTT

*Professor of English in Princeton  
University*



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TO  
JUNIOUS SPENCER MORGAN  
CLASSMATE COLLEAGUE AND FELLOW BOOKLOVER  
THIS TOKEN  
OF  
OLD AND UNBROKEN FRIENDSHIP



## Preface

AS a form of literary art the elaborate preface is rapidly becoming extinct. And in the case of so unpretentious a book as this little collection of essays there can be neither need nor wish of its momentary revival. For these studies are merely fragmentary records of a booklover's journeyings through the pleasantest of lands — the land of books. They have no theories of literature to expound, no philosophy of life to express. There is not, so far at least as I can see, any one central or dominating idea upon which as a connecting thread these detached essays are strung. They are simply random impressions of travel, and nothing more.

I have chosen to call them "studies," because, it seems to me, they bear the same relation to finished works that the hasty sketches

## Preface

of a painter in some notebook or portfolio of travel bear to his completed pictures. They make no pretence to being complete and definitive discussions of their themes. They attempt only to seize certain aspects, to record certain impressions, of stopping-places on the journey. They may at least amuse the casual reader; at best, perhaps, they may interest the more thoughtful and lead him back once more to the great originals.

To the editor of the *Handbooks* published by the Booklovers Library I owe my thanks for his kind permission to reprint the essay on *The Poetry of Matthew Arnold*, which originally appeared in the *Handbook of the Greater Victorian Poets*. For its publication in the present collection this essay has been carefully revised and corrected. The essays on the *Personality of Johnson* and on *The Last Minstrel* first appeared in the *Booklovers Magazine*, and I am indebted to its editor for the courtesy which has permitted their in-

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clusion in this volume. Of these the first now appears in a much longer form, the second is reprinted with only a few verbal changes.

Were I to thank by name all the friends who have aided me by encouragement, advice, criticism, and correction during the years in which these studies have been put together, I should overrun the limits of a preface. But if by chance any one of them should see this page and recall those instances of help which I so well remember, I would ask him to feel the sincerity of my unspoken thanks and to think of me as not all unmindful, not all ungrateful, for past help and present friendship.

T. M. P.

*Silver Bay,  
Lake George,  
August, 1904.*





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## The Poetry of Matthew Arnold

**I**T is by his poetry that the place of Matthew Arnold in English literature will in the end be determined. Such was not, it is true, the opinion of his immediate contemporaries. Whether they cheered him as a child of the Sun God slaying with the shafts of Apollo the giants of Philistia and the dragons of antiquated superstition, or whether they shrank from him as a faithless and hopeless blasphemer of national traditions and the ancient faith, the men of his own age thought rather of his prose than of his poetry. One reason for this no doubt lay in the predominating quantity of his prose. His poems are con-

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tained in one not very bulky volume; his essays and discourses, his lectures and criticisms — religious, educational, social, and literary — occupy some nine or ten. His poetry was for the most part written before he was forty years old; he remained a prominent figure in the world of prose till his death at something over sixty-five.

Moreover there was something in the quality of Arnold's poetic work that tended to prevent an instant popularity. Neither the sentiment nor the splendor which made Tennyson the darling of his age were his; he did not have the quick, keen interest in life, the broad human sympathies, which so rapidly recommended Browning to the hearts of thinking, feeling, men and women on both sides of the Atlantic, when once the spell of his strange new style was broken. Arnold's first volume of poems attracted hardly any attention; his second he himself withdrew from the public before fifty copies were sold. A nobly sym-

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pathetic review by Swinburne of the *New Poems* of 1867 marked the turn of the tide. This was the first book of Arnold's poems that met with an appreciative reception from the general public; and with this book he laid aside his singing robes. Except for the lofty elegy on Dean Stanley and two or three graceful and tender poems on the death of some household pets, he wrote no line of poetry again.

But to-day, when his theological polemics are neglected alike by friend and foe, when his social ideals are, for good or evil, very rapidly left behind in the tremendous advance of scientific materialism, when even his literary judgments are assailed as partial and subjective, the beauty and the worth of his poetry are dawning more brightly upon a world that begins to wonder at its own blindness. A hush has fallen upon English poetry in the last decade. The elanging trumpet tones of Browning ring no longer in our ears; the rich

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and tender harmonies of Tennyson no longer overwhelm the other voices. Out of the past there rises the cool, clear, flute-like note of Arnold — not broad, not deep, but of a charm for the lovers of purity and perfection in art such as is hard to find elsewhere in English poetry.

No good biography of Arnold exists, but after all it does not matter much. The important facts of his life are known, and his *Letters*, published in 1895, give us a presentation of his personality such as few biographies afford. He was the oldest son of a father scarcely less famous than himself, Dr. Thomas Arnold, the scholar, historian, and preacher. He received the orthodox classical English education, at Winchester, at Rugby under his father, and at Oxford. As an undergraduate at the university he did not greatly distinguish himself, although he won a prize for poetry and took a fellowship at Oriel College. But he drank deep of the fountains of classical



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literature and poetry. In one sense of the word, at least, he is the most classic of the Victorian poets. In poetry, as in criticism, he looked back to the Greeks as his models, and his love of clearness, of order and restraint, of firm outline and polished phrase, are largely due to his long and loving study of the ancient masters.

There were, however, other influences upon his youth than that of the Greeks. Foremost of these, perhaps, was the influence of Goethe. No other English poet reveals in the same degree as Arnold the deep impression left on modern life and thought by the greatest of all modern poets since Shakespeare. What appealed to him especially in Goethe was the keen insight into the problems of life, the serene and lofty spirit that rose above the turmoil of the world, the mingled strength and sweetness of the poet's nature. In prose and verse Arnold is never weary of paying homage to his master.

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“He took the suffering human race,  
He read each wound, each weakness clear;  
And struck his finger on the place,  
And said: *Thou ailest here, and here!*  
He look'd on Europe's dying hour  
Of fitful dream and feverish power;  
His eye plunged down the weltering strife,  
The turmoil of expiring life —  
He said: *The end is everywhere —*  
*Art still has truth, take refuge there!*  
And he was happy, if to know  
Causes of things, and far below  
His feet to see the lurid flow  
Of terror, and insane distress,  
And headlong fate, be happiness.”

Even more important, perhaps, in its influence on the young Arnold was the poetry and personality of Wordsworth. Of all the poets of the revolutionary period, Wordsworth has exercised the greatest power over his successors in English literature. Indeed, with the exception of Browning, the most original and independent of them all, there is hardly a poet, before the advent of the Pre-

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raphaelites, who does not show strong traces of his masterful sway. But no other poet was so reverent a disciple of Wordsworth as Matthew Arnold. This was due not merely to the instinctive worship which boyhood pays to genius, though the long sojourns of the Arnolds in the region where every flower, and rock, and stream was sanctified by Wordsworth's song may have laid the foundations of his discipleship. It was mainly because Wordsworth had found the secret which Arnold sought after in vain — the secret whose mystery wrung from him at times his most lyrical cry. One word appears again and again in Arnold's verse — "calm." Throughout his battle with the crushing influences of the world, in all his doubts and agonies of spirit, Arnold looked forward to this goal. It was not triumph, or knowledge, or love that Arnold prayed for, but serene, unshaken repose, attained after the storms of life by self-mastery of spirit. And Wordsworth had not only attained this

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calm, but seemed to have the power, in happy moments, to guide his followers to the same desired haven.

“He found us when the age had bound  
Our souls in its benumbing round;  
He spoke, and loosed our heart in tears.  
He laid us as we lay at birth  
On the cool flowery lap of earth,  
Smiles broke from us and we had ease;  
The hills were round us, and the breeze  
Went o’er the sun-lit fields again;  
Our foreheads felt the wind and rain.  
Our youth return’d; for there was shed  
On spirits that had long been dead,  
Spirits dried up and closely furl’d,  
The freshness of the early world.”

No account of the forces that went to mold the character of Matthew Arnold would be complete which neglected the influence exerted upon him by his father. In some respects the two were far apart. Dr. Arnold, with all his genuine goodness, was something of a Philistine — so much so, that some mocking

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critic characterized Matthew, the deadly enemy of Philistia, as "David, the son of Goliath." He was somewhat hard, somewhat narrow, not only a sincere believer in orthodox Christianity, but one of its foremost champions against the new spirit of doubt. At the first glance it is the difference, rather than the likeness, between father and son that is apparent. But one need not be a profound student of Matthew Arnold to recognize the paternal qualities in his work and character. From his father came his sincerity, his moral earnestness, his care for conduct — in short, all the Hebraic elements of his nature. With all his championship of Hellenism Matthew Arnold was, one feels, rather a Jew than a Greek, more at home with Saint Paul than with Socrates. Something more than mere filial reverence inspires the noble memorial verses written by his father's grave. There is spiritual sympathy as well as profound admiration in the lines which tell of the strength "zealous, benefi-

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cent, firm," that marked the elder Arnold's hold on life. And it was in such servants, or rather sons, of God as his father that the poet recognized the predestined leaders of mankind to whom he addressed the apostrophe which closes *Rugby Chapel*.

"In the hour of need  
Of your fainting, dispirited race,  
Ye, like angels, appear,  
Radiant with ardor divine!  
Beacons of hope, ye appear!  
Languor is not in your heart,  
Weakness is not in your word,  
Weariness not on your brow.  
Ye alight in our van! At your voice,  
Panic, despair, flee away.

. . . . .  
Ye fill up the gaps in our files,  
Strengthen the wavering line,  
Stablish, continue our march,  
On, to the bound of the waste,  
On, to the City of God."

Such were the influences under which the young poet brought out in 1849 his first book of verse, *The Strayed Reveller and other Poems*.



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It fell, as has been said, still-born from the press. The same fate, to be sure, has attended many first volumes of verse, but few have deserved it less. Browning and Tennyson are, no doubt, greater poets than Arnold, but only a prophet after the event would be able to discern more of promise in the incoherent beauties of *Pauline*, or in the somewhat thoughtless rhymes and fancies of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, than in this little volume, while in actual performance it fairly beats them out of the field. Setting aside the title poem, a series of pictures loosely strung together in the irregular rhymeless metre that Arnold was so fond of, we have here the splendid sonnet to Shakespeare, the strong and finely finished *Mycerinus*, the magic melodies of *The New Sirens*, and the grave pathos of *The Sick King in Bokhara*. And there are even finer things in the book.

*The Forsaken Merman*, for example, is a permanent addition to English literature.

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How good it is may, perhaps, be best ascertained by a comparison with Tennyson's early poems, the *Merman* and the *Mermaid*. It is hard to praise with discretion the vivid clearness of its pictures, the haunting music of its changing rhythms, and, best and rarest of all, the passionate cry of its wild, immortal, yet strangely human pathos. One, at least, of the shorter lyrics in this volume shows Arnold for a brief space under the influence of Shelley, and it is to be regretted that he did not yield oftener to the spell. *A Question* is so purely Shelleyan that it might almost be classed with some of the minor songs of the master lyrist. But after all Arnold at his best has a style of his own which is more delightful than any faint Shelleyan echoes. Of that style we need not attempt a definition; an example will serve our purpose better, and the lovely and gracious words fairly tempt the pen to transcribe them.

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“Thin, thin the pleasant human noises grow,  
And faint the city gleams;  
Rare the lone pastoral huts — marvel not thou!  
The solemn peaks but to the stars are known,  
But to the stars, and the cold lunar beams;  
Alone the sun arises, and alone  
Spring the great streams.”

Walter Bagehot once wrote an interesting and suggestive essay on the pure, the ornate, and the grotesque styles in English poetry. Tennyson serves him well for the ornate, some carefully chosen passages of Browning furnish striking specimens of the grotesque, and for examples of the pure style he goes back to Wordsworth and to Milton. But he need not have gone so far, for here, in the first work of Arnold, we have, and not for the last time, a specimen of the pure style almost at its best. It is as classic as a statue by Praxiteles. Not a word can be added, not a word can be altered; the pictorial and musical qualities blend in perfect harmony, and the

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grave music of the verse gives fit utterance to the solemn beauty of the thought.

The last poem of the collection, though by no means the most perfect, is perhaps the most remarkable, and in many ways the most characteristic in the book. *Resignation* is the first poem where the distinctive Arnoldian undertone of grave and thoughtful melancholy vibrates throughout. Here, too, we have in quintessence Arnold's whole poetic philosophy: the immutability of nature and of her laws, the restless longing of the heart of man, the vanity of this longing and of all struggle to realize it, the duty of renunciation and endurance, the aid which nature offers in the effort to endure, and the final reward of renunciation in the attainment of "quiet, and a fearless mind." It is not a very cheerful philosophy for a young man of twenty-seven, but to Arnold, at all times of his life, the world was not a cheerful, though far from an unlovely, place.

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“The mute turf we tread,  
The solemn hills around us spread,  
This stream which falls incessantly,  
The strange-scrawl'd rocks, the lonely sky,  
If I might lend their life a voice,  
Seem to bear rather than rejoice.”

The characteristic notes and beauties of this volume appear again and again in Arnold's later poems; Arnold developed, indeed, and increased his powers, but he remained essentially the same. There is no such change in him as we find between the Browning of *Pauline* and the Browning of *The Ring and the Book*, or between the Tennyson of *Lilian* or *The Sea-Fairies* and the Tennyson of *Rizpah* or *Vastness*.

Arnold's second volume, *Empedocles on Etna and other Poems*, appeared in 1852, and was hastily withdrawn from circulation by the author. The reason for this appears to have been that he could not bear to contemplate the title-piece in print. “A situation,” he said, “in which a continuous state of mental

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distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance, is in actual life painful, not tragic, and its representation in poetry is painful also." This is no doubt true, and, moreover, it must be confessed that *Empedocles* as a drama, even as a closet drama, is quite impossible. But the poem may be regarded in another light than as a drama, and all lovers of true poetry owe deep gratitude to Robert Browning, who persuaded Arnold to reprint in 1867 this long-suppressed work. It contains in the long monologue of the hero "the noblest exposition," to quote Swinburne's words, "of the gospel of *αὐτάρκεια*, the creed of self-sufficiency, which sees for man no clearer or deeper duty than that of intellectual self-reliance, self-dependence, self-respect." Even those who reject this gospel of self-sufficiency as inadequate may appreciate the dignity of its ideas and the grave beauty of the words in which they are presented. Of the lovely group of songs put into the mouth of Callicles

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there can be but one opinion — they are flawless gems in the crown of English lyric poetry. And their beauty is enhanced by the perfect propriety of their setting. Arnold loved to finish his longer poems with some specially fine bit of verse, not always very closely connected with the main subject. The classical example, of course, is the superb *finale* of *Sohrab and Rustum*; but even that great passage yields in dramatic propriety to the last song of Callicles. After the bitterness of human anguish, after the flame and smoke of Etna, comes Apollo with his choir, comes

“The night in her silence,  
The stars in their calm.”

*Tristram and Iseult*, next to *Empedocles* the longest poem of this volume, is by no means the best. It is Arnold's first attempt at narrative poetry, and though he was more successful in narrative than in the drama, he can hardly be called a master in the art of telling a story in verse. There are many beautiful

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passages in this poem, chiefly lyrical or descriptive, but it breaks down at the very climax. Arnold had a strange deficiency of ear, though at his best none of his contemporaries was master of a finer music, and in this poem he chose to embody the parting words of the ill-starred lovers in a jingling trochaic metre that jars on every sense of the fitness of things.

*Iseult.*

“Tristram, ah, for love of Heaven, speak kindly!  
What, I hear these bitter words from thee?  
Sick with grief I am, and faint with travel —  
Take my hand—dear Tristram, look on me!

*Tristram.*

I forgot, thou comest from thy voyage.—”

The truth is that Arnold, one of the least passionate of English poets, simply could not conceive such a situation as this, and his attempt to portray what he had neither seen nor felt was fore-doomed to failure. A passage in the third part of the poem probably represents his own view of such a love as that of Tristram and Iseult.



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“I swear, it angers me to see  
How this fool passion gulls men potently;  
Being, in truth, but a diseased unrest,  
And an unnatural overheat at best.”

That is a philosophic and, possibly, a correct view; but it is hardly capable of poetic treatment. To do Arnold justice he seems to have realized his own deficiencies in this matter. The passion of love, which plays so large a part in the poetry of Browning and of Tennyson, is almost entirely absent from his verse. Its place is taken sometimes by tender affection, oftener by hopeless longing. Never after his failure in *Tristram and Iseult* did he attempt to handle a great and passionate love-story.

Two of the most noteworthy poems of this volume are the *Memorial Verses* and the *Stanzas in Memory of the Author of Obermann*. Both belong, as their titles show, to the group of elegiac poems which go so far to establish Arnold's rank as a poet. Something more must be said of this group in the closing esti-

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mate of Arnold's work. It is enough for the present to point out that these two poems, both for conception and execution, for polished beauty of word and grave dignity of thought, stand very high in the group to which they belong.

Two other poems in this volume deserve more than a passing mention. *A Summer Night* is, perhaps, the very highest poetic expression of the mingled despair and fortitude, the disgust with the world and the relief to be found in the contemplation of nature, which go to make up the essential undertone of most of Arnold's verse. And the technical excellences of the poem, as always happens when Arnold is possessed by his theme, are the perfect reflection of the underlying thought. The lovely moonlit night-piece with which the poem opens, the contrast which it draws between the slave of life and the rebel, are equally fine in thought and word; and it rises to a fit climax of supreme lyrical utterance in the

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noble apostrophe to the heavens which forms its close.

The poem known under the various titles of *To Marguerite* — *In returning a volume of Letters*, *Isolation*, and *To Marguerite—Continued*, is, I think, the loveliest of Arnold's poems of love. And it is worth noting that this poem deals, not with the rapture of possession, nor with the unutterable sadness of remembered kisses after death, but with the sense of that predestined solitude of the soul which even love is unable to overcome. The theme is the same as that of Browning's *Two in the Campagna*, and nothing can show more clearly the difference between the character and art of the two great poets than a comparison of the elder singer's strong and vibrating emotion, full of the sense of infinite passion and the pain of finite hearts, with the melancholy acceptance by the younger of the solemn laws under which "we mortal millions live alone." From the point of view of pure poetry,

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at least, the comparison does not turn out to Arnold's disadvantage; the closing phrase, in which all the depth, and bitterness, and sad estranging power of the sea are caught up in three words, may challenge a place among the greatest single lines of English poetry.

How any poet could have the heart to withdraw such a volume from the public is inexplicable except on the theory that he retired in order to make his entrance more effective when next he appeared in the lists. The withdrawal, at any rate, was short, for in the next year, 1853, Arnold put forth another volume, omitting, indeed, *Empedocles* and some other poems, but reprinting a fair selection from his earlier work, and adding several new poems of great worth and beauty.

The longest and most pretentious of these is *Sohrab and Rustum*. This is admittedly the best of Arnold's narrative poems, and by some critics it is ranked as the first of all his works. This, however, is an opinion which

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seems to be based on theory rather than on fact. The epic is, perhaps, the highest form of poetry, and undoubtedly this poem is Arnold's nearest approach to epic height. But in art a success, even along lower lines, outweighs an ambitious but unattaining effort. And that *Sohrab and Rustum*, in spite of its manifold beauties, its stately verse, its noble imagery, and well-conducted story, does not quite attain will be clear, it seems to me, to anyone who compares it with the true epic tone in ancient or modern verse, with the wrath and sorrow of Achilles, with the love and vengeance of Kriemhild, with the passion of battle and of loyalty that rings through the last canto of *Marmion*. The situation is one of the most pathetic in literature; but where is the thrill of vital sympathy to make us feel it? Where is the divine creative power to put life into the stately but shadowy figures of father and son caught in the toils of Fate? *Sohrab and Rustum* is a noble poem — one

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that we can read and re-read with increasing appreciation. But what we feel is rather admiration for the chaste and polished art of the poet, than the living presence of that fierce and tragic power which, in the true epic, grips and carries us whither it will.

At least two of the lyrics of this volume would suffice to save a poet from complete forgetfulness: *Philomela*, in which Arnold catches the passion, as surely as Keats did the magic, of the nightingale's song, and the wonderful *Requiescat*. Of such a poem as this last it is useless to speak. If a reader cannot see its flawless perfection; if he cannot feel its tender beauty and solemn pathos, culminating, as it does, in one inevitable and unforgettable line, he is indeed to be pitied, but not to be argued with.

*The Church of Brou*, on the other hand, shares with *Tristram* the distinction of being one of Arnold's few uneven, one might almost say unsatisfactory, poems. It was ap-

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parently written some years before the publication of the volume, and its early date may account for the triviality of its first and the inadequacy of its second part. But the close is in Arnold's best vein. Here, as seldom in his verse, the tender note of human affection vibrates through the soft reposeful beauty of the words. It is quite worth while to read through the earlier parts for the shock of pleased surprise that comes with the opening invocation of the third,

“So rest, for ever rest, O princely Pair!”

And surprise gives way to a reverent thankfulness for such a precious gift of song, as we approach the noble climax and listen with the buried lovers to the passage of the angel's wings,

“And on the lichen-cruled leads above  
The rustle of the eternal rain of love.”

The crowning glory of the whole volume is *The Scholar-Gipsy*, but we may defer com-

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ment on this poem till we can consider it along with its companion piece, *Thyrsis*.

Two years later, in 1855, Arnold published a second series of selections from his earlier poems, adding to them only one short song of little value, and the long narrative of *Balder Dead*. This poem has had the good fortune to be praised by Mr. Henley, no mean judge of poetry and somewhat sparing of his praise. But one can hardly agree with him that *Balder Dead* was "written in Arnold's most fortunate hour." Whatever has been said in praise of *Sohrab and Rustum* may be repeated of this poem. But it has, if possible, even less of life than its predecessor. All the world, runs the old story, wept for Balder's death; but it is hard to imagine that any human being was ever moved to tears by Arnold's version of the strange, sad tale. Its artificial beauties, "faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null," leave most of us as cold as the waste of snow that Hermod traversed on his way to Hela's realm.



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The year 1858 saw the appearance of the one work of Arnold's which must be pronounced a hopeless failure. *Merope* is an attempt to reproduce in English the old Greek drama. Imitations are, as a rule, fore-doomed to failure, and of all imitations that of the Greek drama in modern English seems the most hopeless. In the nineteenth century, at any rate, there has been but one approach to success in numberless attempts, Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*. It is not worth while in this place to discuss the reason for such failure; better to lay *Merope* aside and pass on to Arnold's last book of verse.

This was the *New Poems* published in 1867, the year in which Arnold laid down his professorship of poetry at Oxford. The book falls naturally into three parts — the sonnets, the lyrics rhymed and rhymeless, and the elegies. Perhaps no single one of the sonnets quite equals the great apostrophe to Shakespeare in the first volume, but the group as a whole out-

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ranks its earlier fellows. Several of them are particularly distinguished by the depth and sincerity of the religious sentiment which breathes through them — a sentiment which shows a better, and essentially a truer, side of Arnold than the reckless flippancy of many of his controversial writings.

The lyrics of the collection are, with one exception, hardly up to the earlier standard. But that exception is so excellent that it alone would save the volume; it is *Dover Beach*. Here once more we have Arnold at his best, thought, word, and rhythm blending in the perfect song. It is hard to know what to praise most in the poem, the glorious picture of the moonlight and the floodtide, the “passionate interpretation of nature” which catches in the tremulous cadence of the waves the eternal note of sadness, or the famous simile of the ebbing sea of faith. And besides all these there is one supreme touch in this lyric which gives it a unique place among all Arnold’s

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poems — the human cry with which the last stanza opens,

“Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another!”

Here for once the sad, proud consciousness of isolation gives way to the sense of human sympathy and comradeship in all disastrous fight. For once we note in Arnold the presence of the idea which the great symbolic painter of our day has embodied immortally in “Love and Life.”

It is after all, however, the elegies which give to this volume its distinctive note. Of these, *Heine's Grave*, in spite of the fine and often quoted passage on the weary Titan, is the least satisfactory. It is written in the irregular rhymeless verse that had such a dangerous fascination for Arnold. *Rugby Chapel* is in the same metre, but here the poet is really possessed by his theme, and the result is a very noble tribute to the dead — noticeable among all of Arnold's elegies for the ex-

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plicit testimony it bears to his belief in immortality. The *Stanzas from Carnac* and *A Southern Night* are memorials to his brother, the latter a very beautiful lament, flooded, like so many of Arnold's poems, with moonlight, and murmurous with the sound of the sea. *Obermann Once More* and the *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse* are naturally connected by their theme, the lament for a dead faith. *Obermann* is somewhat too long. The shadowy personage who gives the poem its name discourses through nine pages on the rise and fall of religion, on present despair and on hope for the future. The first part of his speech, indeed, is already a classic; everyone knows the famous stanzas that tell of the hard Pagan world, the brooding East, the miraculous conquests, and slow, reluctant death of Christianity. But the remainder of the poem is somewhat diffuse and contrasts unfavorably with the terser, stronger close of the *Obermann* poem of 1852. The *Stanzas from the Grande*

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*Chartreuse*, however, are not open to the charge of diffuseness. Indeed, it is hard to see what charge the lover of pure and thoughtful poetry could bring against them. We have in them the highest expression in the elegiac mood of the theme that Arnold treated with supreme lyric power in *Dover Beach*. They are a revelation of the poet's own divided mind.

“Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born.”

But they are something more than that. The poem, as a whole, is a typical, one might almost say the typical, utterance of the Middle Victorian era, a period when rationalistic science seemed to be carrying all before it. The calm assumption that the Christian faith is only “a dead time's exploded dream” is by no means peculiar to Arnold. It marks much of the thought of his day. What is peculiar to Arnold is his sincere regret for the vanished past, his instinctive repugnance to the hardness

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and loudness of the new age, even though he believes that the age is right. This attitude is disclosed even more plainly in the remarkable poem, *Bacchanalia*, which is also included in this volume.

And now we come to *Thyrsis*, with its predecessor, *The Scholar-Gipsy*. Here, it would seem, if anywhere, we have the noblest work of Arnold. Serene beauty of thought, tender melancholy of mood, perfect fitness of expression, and harmonious rhythm, characterize both these poems and characterize them throughout. There are no languors, no depressions, no passages of prose thrown into metrical form. The famous simile with which *The Scholar-Gipsy* closes is far from being the "purple patch" it has irreverently been styled. One cannot sew a purple patch upon a robe of Tyrian dye; and, fine as the closing stanzas are, they yield in excellence to some of the earlier pictures of English life and scenery. Two beauties we may note common

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to both these poems: Arnold's loving memories of his Alma Mater; and his deep and almost sensuous delight in aspects of nature inseparably blended with those memories. Arnold has apostrophized Oxford in a famous prose passage, but all that he says there is packed into one line of *Thyrsis*,

“That sweet city with her dreaming spires.”

The loving sympathy with nature apparent in almost every line of these poems it is impossible to praise too highly. The picture in *Thyrsis* of a rain-drenched English garden with its storm-vexed trees and fallen chestnut flowers is a masterpiece of poetic word-painting. Hardly less delightful is the vision of the moonlit ferry on the stripling Thames in *The Scholar-Gipsy*, or the night-piece in which the line of festal light in Christ-Church hall shines through the driving snow-storm on the Cumnor hills. And for once in Arnold's work the wonted opposition between the rest-

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less, turbulent soul of man and the sweet calm of nature disappears. In these two poems nature and man blend together in a perfect harmony.

Poetry like this tempts one to linger over it. There is much that might be said. It is hard to pass without mention Arnold's striking success in adapting the conventions of the antique pastoral elegy to a lament for a modern poet. Something, too, one would like to say on the gleam of hope that lights the close of *Thyrsis*, faint, indeed, when compared with the sun-burst that exalts and glorifies the final stanzas of *Adonais*, but not without a tender beauty of its own. But all one can do is to recommend these elegies to every lover of pure poetry. They will serve as an unfailing test of a reader's power to appreciate poetry for its own sake.

*Westminster Abbey*, the elegy on Arnold's school friend, Dean Stanley, is a noble poem, but after *Thyrsis* it seems a little cold, a little



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artificial. The group of poems on the household pets, Geist, Matthias, and Kaiser, deserves, at least, a passing mention. Here a very different Arnold is revealed from the Arnold of the poems or the essays. It is the Arnold whom only his intimates knew — gentle, affectionate, playful, and not without a trace of kindly humor, the centre of a pleasant company of cats and canaries, and children and dachshunds. They are not without true poetic merit, these little poems; but their chief value lies in the revelation which they make of a new and more genial side of the poet's mind and life.

Some of the characteristic beauties and defects of Arnold have been revealed by this critical examination of his successive volumes. But a brief summary may serve to gather up the results so far attained and to fix them in the reader's mind.

In the first place, it is easy to say what Arnold was not. He was not a great narrative

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poet. No need, after all, to compare him with the great masters of the epic — his own contemporaries surpassed him again and again. Matthew Arnold could no more have written *How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix* or *The Revenge* than he could have written the *Iliad* or *Paradise Lost*; and this in spite of his theory that “the eternal objects of poetry are actions — human actions.” But Arnold, like his master, Wordsworth, achieves the best results when he departs from theory and surrenders himself to instinct and inspiration. He was not himself a man of action, nor was he capable of sympathizing with action, except theoretically. He disliked and distrusted nearly all the great actors in the social and political movements of his day. Small wonder, then, that his narrative poems interest us by their beauty of form, by their lyrical, descriptive, or meditative passages — by anything in short, rather than by the human actions which they portray.

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Again Arnold is not a dramatic poet. We may waive the fact that he never wrote a great play. No more did Browning or Tennyson. But Arnold cannot lay claim even to the dramatic qualities which Browning and Tennyson possessed. We have seen that he could not tell a satisfactory story, but it is even plainer that he could not create a character. As we review Arnold's work we realize, with a little touch of surprise, the almost entire absence from it of men and women. The unreality of Sohrab and of Rustum has been already pointed out; the gods in *Balder* are even more remote and lifeless; Obermann is a ghost, the Scholar-Gipsy a myth, even the poet's nearest friend becomes the conventional dead shepherd of pastoral elegy. And the women! Marguerite is a dainty lady who allows herself to be kissed and abandoned, neither with extreme concern; Fausta and Eugenia are mere *nomina umbrae*. The truth is that Arnold is one of the least objective of English poets.

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Byron's lack of objectivity is a commonplace of criticism; but Byron had, at least, the gift of projecting his own great personality into the figures of his poems. Harold, Manfred, and Juan are, it may be, mere embodiments of various aspects of their creator, but they share something of his fiery life, and so long as the personality of Byron thrills and fascinates, so long will these characters endure — and that will be as long as English poetry is read. But is there any character of Arnold's poetry which can be identified with Arnold?

On the technical side of poetry there are few faults to be found with Arnold's work, yet even here the adversary may advance something against him. He lacked almost entirely the richness of color, the delight in lovely words for their own sake and for the sake of their associations, which makes so many lines of Tennyson a wonder and a wild delight. He lacked almost entirely the sense of that "natural magic," to use his own fine phrase, by which

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at times Shakespeare seems to transport us in the twinkling of an eye to fairyland. Worst of all, he often lacked a true ear for rhyme and rhythm. This led him to perpetrate such assonances as "ranging" and "hanging," as "scorn" and "faun "; at times to write, under the delusion that it was metrical, such a passage as the following, which, printed as prose, reads:

"Thou standest smiling down on me!  
Thy right arm, leaned up against the column there, props thy soft cheek; thy left holds, hanging loosely, the deep cup, ivy-cinctured, I held but now."

It would be an interesting and not uninteresting exercise for the student of poetry to attempt the scansion of these lines, or even their arrangement in metrical form. Arnold never outgrew this dulness and uncertainty of ear. Some of his most prosaic and unrhythmical passages occur in his last volume of verse.

And now, having cleared the field, we may

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proceed to the more pleasing and gracious task of defining what Arnold was, and of pointing out his peculiar poetic characteristics. He was, undoubtedly, a great didactic and critical, a great elegiac and lyric poet. Didactic, not in the old-fashioned sense of Pope and Johnson, nor even in the often too obtrusive fashion of Wordsworth. But he had a distinct philosophy of life, and this philosophy interpenetrates and informs his poetry. It does not harm it. Arnold, in poetry at least, was not one of those preachers who are forever dragging in the moral. He lived in the world of ideas, as some poets, Mr. Kipling, for example, live in the world of actions. The desire to impart ideas roused him to a point as near that of passionate poetic sympathy as he ever approached. And, accordingly, some of his very best poetry appears in these efforts to communicate ideas which to him were vital and salutary truths. We need only turn to the later sonnets, to *Resignation*, *A Summer Night*,

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and the *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse* to realize the truth of this statement.

Arnold is, perhaps, the greatest of our critical poets. He once defined poetry as being essentially a criticism of life. If poetry were this and this alone, Arnold would be the greatest of English poets. Poetry, of course, is infinitely more than this, even if we give to the definition of criticism Arnold's wide extension of meaning. But whether we take criticism in this larger sense as a study of life with the purpose of distinguishing between the false and the true, or in the customary narrower sense, as the effort to ascertain the predominating ideas and salient characteristics of a writer, Arnold's critical poetry stands, I think, unrivaled. For a criticism of life, for a criticism of literature, couched in grave, yet lovely and harmonious verse, such as abounds in the monologues of *Empedocles*, in the memorial verses for Words-

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worth, and in the *Obermann* poems, we may go far afield before we find his fitting mate.

Arnold's elegies alone would assign him a place among the greater Victorian poets. One critic, indeed, has gone so far as to call him the greatest elegiac poet in English literature. This seems a bold saying, for surely Arnold has never reached such heights as Milton in *Lycidas*, Shelley in *Adonais*, and Tennyson in *In Memoriam*. But quantity counts for something also in determining a poet's work, provided always that it is quantity which does not fall below a certain mark of excellence. And no other English poet has given us so many grave and tender elegies as the author of *Thyrsis*, the *Memorial Verses*, *A Southern Night*, *Rugby Chapel*, *Heine's Grave*, the *Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse*, and the two poems in memory of the author of *Obermann*. The mere roll-call of these titles is enough to confirm those who know their Arnold in the belief that he ranks among the



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very first of the English poets of sorrow and melancholy meditation. He was, indeed, well fitted by nature to be an elegiac poet. A famous phrase in *Resignation* speaks of the poet's "sad lucidity of soul." This quality was eminently characteristic of Arnold himself, and it distinguishes and elevates all his elegies. Sad an elegy must be by its very nature; but it must also be lucid. Wild and wandering cries, however poignant and pathetic they may be, are out of place in this form of poetry. Unless a poet can so far master his sorrow as to look through it and above it, he will prove as incapable of embodying it in the somewhat conventional forms of the elegy, as he will prove incapable of filling these forms with true and sympathetic poetry if his sorrow be not genuine and deeply felt. From this point of view, indeed, it might be maintained, and not altogether without reason, that *Thyrsis* is the most perfect elegy in English. And when to this trait of sad lucidity we add the beauty of

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the diction, imbued, as it is, with a richness of color very rare in Arnold's work, and the melodious rhythm of the echoing lines, the reasons for such a preference seem weighty indeed. But the ranking of poets or poems is a dangerous, and, indeed, uncritical performance. It is enough to point out what a poet has done without attempting to place him above or below his fellows. And of the beauty and poetic worth of Arnold's elegies there can be no doubt in the mind of any student of English poetry.

It is another matter with his lyrical poems. Arnold is not, as a rule, reckoned one of the great singers of our language. Yet I believe the time will come when critics will not only recognize in Arnold's lyrics the loveliest flowers in his garden of verse, but will pronounce any anthology of English lyrics incomplete which does not contain more than one or two of these priceless blossoms of pure poetry. Listen for a moment to the lyrical

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cry that rings through *Requiescat*, *Dover Beach*, *In Utrumque Paratus*, the songs of Callicles, and consider whether we have not here a note as rare as it is beautiful. Tennyson alone, it seems to me, among Victorian poets, can equal these effects, and even Tennyson lacks at times the purity, the simplicity, and the directness which characterize the best of Arnold's lyrics. Browning has many passages and some whole poems instinct with true lyrical feeling, but as a rule Browning is not subjective enough in mood or simple enough in expression to be a great lyric poet. On the other hand, Arnold's profound subjectivity, his intense sensibility of his own moods, and his power of rendering them in language so free from taint or flaw that it seems the direct utterance of the soul, were natural qualifications for a place among the master lyrists of our language higher than has yet been awarded to him — perhaps higher than he ever in reality attained.

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One or two characteristics are yet to be noticed. It is impossible to do justice to Arnold without taking into account the uniform excellence of his work. How much is there in some of our greatest poets, Wordsworth, for instance, and Browning, that might, with no loss to their fame, be omitted altogether from a consideration of their work? But if we set aside the unfortunate *Merope*, and one or two shorter poems, what is there in Arnold that can be omitted without grave loss? One can understand a meaning beneath Arnold's laughing answer, when asked to make a selection from his poems, "I would like to choose them all."

Closely connected with this characteristic is the uniform excellence of the single poems. Sometimes, but rarely, we find purple patches upon a mantle of hodden-gray; but, as a rule, each poem maintains throughout an even excellence of style. And at its highest how pure and noble is this style of Arnold's! He said

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of Wordsworth's style that, at his best, Nature seemed to take the pen and write for him. No higher praise could be given to any poet, and no truer praise to much of Arnold's own poetry. Doubtless this instinct for chastely finished work, which preserved him alike from the too frequent redundancies of Tennyson, and the too startling eccentricities of Browning, was due to the influence of his classical studies; but there has been more than one classically educated poet who has been notably deficient in this instinct.

One specially characteristic feature of Arnold's poetry is his treatment of nature. Since Cowper's day, all great English poets have been nature lovers. Even Browning, whose stress lay upon the incidents in the development of man's soul, illumines his dramatic poetry with sudden pictures of the external world that show him to have been a penetrating observer and a passionate lover of nature. The poetry of Tennyson, the great

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master of the idyllic school, is bathed in a sensuous enjoyment of nature in all her aspects. In Arnold, too, there is this ever-present love of nature, but with a difference. He does not, like Browning, turn to nature to illustrate the life of man, nor does he, like Tennyson, steep his senses in nature for sheer delight in her visible beauty. His relation to the natural world is like that of Wordsworth, a moral relation. But here, again, we must distinguish. Wordsworth sought in nature the inspiration without which man's life was stale, flat, unprofitable. To him the universe was governed by laws, not only mighty, but everlastingly righteous. The man who could penetrate through the superficial aspects of the visible world to grasp these laws, and who, having grasped them, could shape his own life in accordance with them, had learned, in Wordsworth's judgment, the secret of life. Arnold, on the other hand, draws a sharp distinction between man and nature.

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At times, even, as in the sonnet, *In Harmony with Nature*, he contrasts the two as opposing and almost hostile forces;

“Nature is cruel, man is sick of blood;  
Nature is stubborn, man would fain adore.”

This, to be sure, is an unusual view with Arnold. But it is only an exaggeration of his constantly maintained distinction between the world of natural phenomena and the world of man's life and thought. In one of his most thoughtful poems, *Morality*, he represents nature as admiring and applauding “the divine strife,” “the severe earnest air,” of man. As a rule, however, he conceives of nature as apart from and indifferent to man:

“The world which was ere I was born,  
The world which lasts when I am dead;  
  
Which never was the friend of *one*,  
Nor promised love it could not give,  
But lit for all its generous sun,  
And lived itself, and made us live.”

Yet Arnold is not indifferent to nature be-

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cause nature is indifferent to him. On the contrary he finds in the contemplation of nature the attainment, temporary to be sure, but still the attainment, of what with all his soul he most desires — calm. And hence it comes that he turns again and again to the more tranquil and soothing aspects of the world about him, to the peaceful beauty of the English country-side, to the quiet flow of a great river towards its final home, and, most of all, to

“The night in her silence,  
The stars in their calm.”

It has been said that Arnold regarded nature as a sedative, an anodyne. Such a statement is one of the half-truths of criticism which, while not without a basis of fact, are responsible in the end for a wholly wrong impression. It is true that Arnold turns with a profound sense of relief from the weariness, the fever, and the fret of human life to the calm, untroubled world of nature. But he by no means used nature as a drug to deaden



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his senses. The contemplation of nature was to him rather a bath that at once cleansed him from the dust and stains of conflict, and sent him out refreshed and strengthened to face the world again. It is worth recalling the fact that Arnold was a hard-working man. By far the greater part of his poetry was composed during the twenty years that he served as an inspector of English schools, hurrying from town to town, for long years without a resting-place that he could call his home, constantly engaged in the mind and soul destroying task of reading examination papers, and fighting, like Paul at Ephesus, against the wild beasts of British ignorance, obstinacy, and Philistinism. It is no wonder that he turned from such a battle to seek the consolations of nature. The wonderful and laudable thing is that he always went back to the battle again.

And this brings us to the last and noblest characteristic of Arnold's poetry; its essentially manly tone and temper. Arnold has not the

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strong and happy optimism of Browning nor the emotional hopefulness of Tennyson. More a child of his age than either of his great contemporaries, he reflected, as neither of them did, the prevailing spirit of his time. It is for this that superficial critics call him a poet of doubt and despair. Of doubt he is, in a sense, a poet, inasmuch as he gives utterance to the thought of his age, but never of despair. The vigorous teachers of his youth — Goethe, Wordsworth, his own father — forbade such mental cowardice. And Arnold was at heart a deeply religious nature, not a mystic, not an enthusiast, but one whose religion was embraced in the word, conduct. If he laid aside much of the armor of faith worn by his ancestors, it was only to fight more freely in the lighter gear.

“Hath man no second life?—*Pitch this one high!*  
Sits there no judge in Heaven, our sin to see?—  
*More strictly, then, the inward judge obey!*  
Was Christ a man like us? *Ah! let us try*  
*If we then, too, can be such men as he!”*

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On the whole, and in spite of occasional traces of weakness, the dominant note of Arnold's poetry is one of steadfast, almost stoical, endurance of present evils, not without gleams of hope in a future deliverance,

“Still nursing the unconquerable hope,  
Still clutching the inviolable shade.”

Like Tennyson he trusted that somehow good would be the final goal of ill. But unlike Tennyson he was not content to rest in a vague “somehow.” The goal, he held, must be attained by man's own conscious effort; and to Arnold's mind the task, though attended by disheartening difficulties, was not impossible. In lines which may be regarded as closing his poetic career, he represents the typical figure of an age of doubt and despair as prophesying the coming of a new and better day:

“What though there still need effort, strife?  
Though much be still unwon?  
Yet warm it mounts, the hour of life!  
Death's frozen hour is done!

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The world's great order dawns in sheen,  
After long darkness rude,  
Divinelier imaged, clearer seen,  
With happier zeal pursued."

Arnold himself found salvation in a gospel of morality touched by the emotion of poetry, and he looked forward to a time when all the world would listen to this gospel and find in it

"One common wave of thought and joy  
Lifting mankind again."

That his creed seems heterodox to many, perhaps to most, in our day as in his own, does not alter the fact that he believed in it as a means of escape from the deadening influences of the world, and that so believing he sorrowed not as one that has no hope. It is not what he believed, but the fact that he believed, which constitutes the moral and spiritual value of Arnold's work.

Enough has been said to justify Matthew Arnold's claim to a place among the greater Victorian poets — if hardly the equal of Tenny-

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son or Browning, yet in the same class with them. Indeed it seems by no means improbable that a poet of such grace and purity, of such high artistic ideals and achievements, of such moral dignity and manly fortitude, will come to be recognized more and more clearly with the years that make impartial judgment possible as one of the great masters in the broad and lovely realm of English poetry.

## Old Edinburgh and Her Poet-Laureate

**I**N the early decades of the eighteenth century the prosperity of Edinburgh was a thing of the past and her total ruin seemed a thing of the near future. The Union of the Crowns in 1707 by abolishing the Parliament of the northern kingdom had swept fashion and trade from the wynds and closes of her ancient capital into the whirlpool of London, and in so doing had struck an apparently mortal blow at the welfare of the good town. Scotch poets and politicians alike were loud in lament over the desolation which had fallen upon her ancient glories. "There is the end of an auld sang," cried Lord Chancellor Seafield, when the act of Union was signed; and ten years afterward Allan Ramsay apostro-

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phized the once fashionable but then deserted quarter of the Canongate,

“London and death gar thee look droll,  
And hing thy head.”

For nearly half a century the cloud of poverty and abandonment hung heavily over the town. There was no commerce, and little trade. The nobles and gentry who had been wont to spend their holidays and guineas in Edinburgh flourished in London or pined at their country seats according as their politics were Whig or Tory. The University was housed in a group of shabby buildings where a handful of students gathered to hear a set of “useless, needless, headless and defective” professors prelecting on pseudo-science and mediæval metaphysics. Alone of Scottish institutions there remained unbroken the fierce and intolerant national church, which, no longer finding a counterpoise in the power of Parliament, exercised a rigorous and unchallenged domination over the minds and man-

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ners of men. Its seizers and compurgators arrested the godless who appeared upon the streets "during sermons" on the Sabbath. Its obedient magistrates closed the doors of Allan Ramsey's little theatre and pried into his bookshop in search of "villainous, profane, and obscene books and plays." Not even the privacies of family life were hidden from the ever watchful eye of the kirk-session.

From the strict inquisition of the church "non-professors" fled to the club for refuge, and the very names of some of the more noted clubs in Edinburgh were ominous of rebellion against the rule of the saints. The Sulphur Club, the Hell-Fire Club, and Pandemonium rang with the lampoons on the clergy, the loose stories, and the ribald songs that marked the reaction in Scottish society against the severity of church discipline. Between the crushing tyranny of the kirk on the one hand, and the reckless license of the ungodly on the other, Edinburgh in the first half of the eigh-



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teenth century must have been as unpleasant a place of residence as ever thirty thousand souls were gathered in.

Between the years 1750 and 1760, however, affairs began to mend. The country at large was rapidly growing rich and prosperous. Improved methods of agriculture had redeemed many a barren heath and doubled the productivity of arable land. Rents rose in the most amazing fashion; and for the first time in the history of Scotland began to be paid in money instead of in kind. The laird who had formerly received an over-supply of skinny fowls, half-starved sheep, and wretched oats and barley, now found himself in possession of an income sufficient to raise the ancestral mortgage, educate his sons, and marry off his daughters. In the West a thriving trade with the American colonies had sprung up, and Glasgow became a gate through which a golden stream poured into the country. Employment was found in England and her

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colonies for the canny Scot who served his country and feathered his own nest with equal diligence. And what he made abroad he spent at home. Sons of peasants and crofters returned full-handed to buy the estates on which their ancestors had toiled, and to erect beside the ruined keep of the old lord the stately mansion house of the new proprietor.

With the reviving prosperity of the country the fortunes of the capital began again to flourish. From all over Scotland the gentry and nobility flocked into Edinburgh to find lodgings permanent or temporary in some narrow flat in the tall "lands" of the old town. The deserted Canongate became once more the center of wealth and fashion. In the decade or so between 1759 and the opening of the New Town of Edinburgh it was estimated that two dukes, sixteen earls, two dowager countesses, seven lords, seven chief-justices, and thirteen baronets, not to speak of minor gentry, made their homes in that now squalid

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district. Once more the narrow streets of the gray metropolis were brightened by the gay dresses and pretty faces of high-born ladies and rang far into the night with the songs and laughter of noble beaux and macaronis.

Even the iron-bound kirk expanded under the genial influence of the new prosperity. A strong and gradually increasing party in her councils sought to relax her rigorous discipline and to mingle something of humanity and culture with the sincere but narrow piety of former days. Loud was the lament of evangelical elders, crying out with David Deans, "My bowels—my bowels—I am pained at the very heart," over what they termed the "ulcers and the imposthumes and the sores and the leprosies" of the kirk; but the new tendency was irresistible, and in spite of lament and protest the Church of Scotland became, for the most part, what it has since continued to be, one of the greatest civilizing and humanizing agencies of the country.

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A similar change took place about the same time in the world of learning and letters. Robertson, the accomplished leader of the liberal party in the church, was for thirty years Principal of Edinburgh University, and his administration was the most successful that the old university had ever known. In 1770 the number of students was seven hundred, more than double what it had been at the time of the Union. The wretched buildings, more fit, as Robertson said, for almshouses than for a college, were in part swept away, the corner stone of a new structure was laid, and though the work was not completed in Robertson's lifetime, it is to his initiative that Edinburgh owes the stately edifice whose dome to-day rises high over the steep incline of the South Bridge. Of far greater importance, however, than the increased number of students or the reconstruction of the buildings was the new spirit which Robertson and his associates diffused throughout the univer-

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sity. The crabbed, pedantic temper of the old days gave place to a polished, liberal, and broadly human culture. The skepticism of Hume was attacked and the authenticity of Ossian defended without a trace of the bitterness which had raged in the theological and critical writings of the preceding generation. From the portraits of these old professors there beams a gentle humor and a kindly optimism admirably in keeping with their well-brushed small-clothes, their silk stockings, and their powdered wigs.

No small part of this kindliness and culture was due to the eminently social life of the so-called "Literati" of those days, a body to which many of the Edinburgh faculty belonged. Its oldest and most famous member was, of course, the great philosopher and historian, David Hume; its profoundest and most original thinker was Adam Smith. Hume lived in a flat in the Canongate which he boasted of as singularly free from vermin; Adam Smith

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spent the greater part of his life at the little town of Kirkcaldy in Fife. But the country scholar made frequent visits to his brother wise man in the capital, and the suppers at Hume's lodgings in James' Court were true *cæna deorum*. Hume was something of an epicure; he prided himself on his recipe for *soupe a la reine*, on his beef and cabbage, on his mutton and old claret. There seems to have been some point in the contemporary sneer which spoke of Hume and his friends as the "Eaterati," rather than the "Leeterati," as, in broadest Scots, they called themselves. Yet the great attraction of these suppers was not the food and wine, however excellent, but the company that Hume gathered around him. There was John Home, author of the portentous tragedy of "Douglas," firmly believed by all good Scotchmen to outrank anything of Wullie Shakespeare's. There was Adam Ferguson, once the fighting chaplain of the Black Watch, now Professor of Moral Phil-

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osophy at the university. Boswell would be there with brand-new stories of the world of London letters, and of the great Cham who ruled that world. Law was represented by Lord Kanes, cynical, learned, and industrious, who wrote books faster than his rival, Lord Monboddoo, could read them. Even such pillars of the church as Robertson, Blair, and Carlyle of Inveresk, did not disdain to grace the board of the most dangerous of skeptics. Hume's personal character, simple, benevolent, marked by an almost childlike blandness of good humor, was of a sort to make even a zealous churchman forget his essay on miracles; and Adam Smith's verdict that his friend approached "as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit," though it seemed to the jealous orthodoxy of Boswell a "noxious weed in the moral garden," merely echoed the universal opinion of the philosopher's intimates.

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All this new wine of the spirit was poured into old bottles, so far at least as the dwelling-place and habitation of the Edinburghians went. For centuries the town which had grown up along the steep and narrow ridge rising from the Abbey of Holyrood to the still more ancient Castle had retained almost the same dimensions. On the north, the deep valley with its loch, on the south, the swampy grounds, seemed to forbid any lateral expansion. But what the city lacked in breadth it made up in height. Story upon story its lofty houses soared up from the gray rock toward the gray sky. Within them were huddled all sorts and conditions of men, members of the proletariat in the cellar, noblemen and judges in the intermediate stories, with a family or two of workmen in the garret. There were no slums in the old town where the highest and the lowest in the land inhabited the same building.

Or perhaps it would be better to say that



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the city was one vast slum. For the manners and customs of its inhabitants were dirty beyond description. There were no drains in the houses, no sewers beneath the streets. At ten o'clock each night the accumulated filth of each flat was poured down from the windows upon the pavement to the tune of a wild chorus of "gardy loo" (*gardez l'eau*). Its varied stench, "the flowers of Edinburgh" some wicked wit called them, arose to heaven; and the belated foot-passenger picking his way through the dimly lighted streets had a dangerous and malodorous journey homewards. "I smell you in the dark," muttered Johnson as he rolled along the High Street towards Boswell's lodgings on the night of his arrival at Edinburgh. At seven o'clock each morning a scanty train of scavengers appeared to clean the streets; except on Sunday, when neither necessity, charity, nor mercy were deemed to demand their attendance. The common stairs within the houses were at least as filthy as the

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streets without. The very churches were, as Boswell testifies, shamefully dirty. When Johnson saw the sign "*Clean your feet*" at the door of the Royal Infirmary, he remarked to Boswell, not altogether without a chuckle of true English superiority, "There is no occasion for putting this at the doors of your churches."

Within the tall "lands," built so close together that the inhabitants of adjoining houses could often shake hands across the deep but narrow chasm that divided them, the inhabitants lived in the most confined of quarters. Four, five, or at most six rooms constituted the apartments of the wealthiest families. Servants slept outside the house or under the kitchen table; cots were made up for the nurse and children in the master's study, turned-up beds with curtains drawn around them stood in the drawing room. Naturally the entertaining that could be done in such apartments was of the smallest. My lady could receive

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a few friends over a cup of tea in her bedroom, but when her lord wished to dine or wine his friends recourse was had of mere necessity to a tavern.

Taverns, in fact, played almost the same part in the social life of Edinburgh during the third quarter of the eighteenth century as coffee-houses had done in London in Addison's time. They were the common meeting-places of a race of men to whom home meant little more than a place to sleep. Doctors met their patients, lawyers consulted with their clients, over a mug of ale or a tass of brandy in the little rooms of a dark tavern half underground. Here the city magistrates were accustomed to meet, and here the ministers of the General Assembly were entertained. Even tradespeople attended to their business as much within the tavern as within the shop. As a result, the greater part of the male population of Edinburgh drank steadily from morn till eve and far on into the night. At ten o'clock

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at night the drum of the city guard warned all God-fearing men to leave the taverns and seek their homes, in accordance with the provisions of an ancient law which closed all places of entertainment at that hour. But the law at this time was laughed at by the very magistrates sworn to enforce it. Scott's picture of Councillor Pleydell is but a faint sketch of the accomplished toper of the olden time. Even to-day the capacity of a well-seasoned Scotchman for his native drink is something to appal the untried foreigner; but if we may believe a tithe of the stories collected by such a creditable authority as Dean Ramsay, the Scotch of to-day are but poor and degenerate scions of a heroic race.

It was in the nature of things impossible that the close and confined life of "land," flat, and tavern should endure. Population grew denser and wealth increased, while new ideas of comfort sprang up that were impossible of realization under the then prevailing circum-

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stances. One by one, and with a certain hesitation, families crept out of their gloomy wynds and narrow flats to find a home in the "self-contained" houses built about 1760 in George Square, a few minutes' walk to the south of the Old Town. In the opposite quarter the great North Bridge was built to span the valley that still separates the Old Town from the New. Plans were laid for draining the Nor' Loch where the Princes Street gardens now lie; and little by little shops and dwelling houses began to push westward along what is now the finest street in the British Isles. As early as 1770 David Hume, who might almost have been called the presiding genius of the pleasant life of the Old Town, removed to a house across the bridge on the corner of a little unnamed lane which some wag baptized in his honor St. David's Street. In a couple of decades the movement was accomplished and the "lands" of the Canon-gate and High Street, once more deserted by

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their noble and wealthy occupants, were turned over to the tenancy of the lower classes. By 1783 the Lord President's old lodgings were occupied by a "rouping wife" who sold old furniture, a chairman left Lord Drummore's former apartment because he was not sufficiently accommodated, and troops of dirty children swarmed and littered on the stairs along which all the beauty and fashion of Edinburgh had passed two short decades before. The glory of the Old Town had departed, and the social life of the New Town was a new life under new conditions. But the old did not pass away without its *sacer vates*. Just at the height of the Old Town's prosperity in 1769, Robert Fergusson returned from a fruitless expedition to the North to become the laureate of the city where he had been born and where he was so soon to die.

The researches of Fergusson's indefatigable biographer, Dr. Grosart, have made it possible for us to form some notion of the poet's

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early life and training. He was born, it appears, in 1750, in a little old house in Cap-and-Feather Close, a dirty alley opening off the High Street. His father, a struggling clerk and copyist, accomplished with some measure of success the seemingly impossible task of feeding, clothing, and educating four children on his meagre salary of £20 a year. Robert's health was from the beginning delicate; but he managed, none the less, to secure a first-rate education at the Edinburgh High School, the Dundee Grammar School, and the University of St. Andrews. Like so many poor young Scotchmen, he was destined by his parents for the ministry, for which calling a four years' course at the university was a necessary preparation. The few anecdotes that remain of Fergusson's college life, however, show him a youth of anything but clerical tendencies. He wrote verses in broad Scots satirizing his masters and his companions. He was degraded from the post of precentor in the college chapel

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for an irreverent jest upon a bibulous fellow-student, and he was at one time actually dismissed from the university, though, as he was recalled within four days, the offence can hardly have been a weighty one. On the other hand, he read Virgil and Horace with diligence and enjoyment, spent a good portion of his frugal stipend upon handsome editions of Shakespeare, Milton, and Pope, and sedulously cultivated the friendship of Professor Wilkie, the farmer philosopher, and author of the ponderous "Epigoniad." In fact, his character was well summed up by the college porter as "a tricky callant, but a fine laddie for a' that."

A few months before his graduation his father's sudden death put an end to whatever thought he may have had of pursuing his studies for the ministry, and after a vain attempt to secure some position through the favor of a prosperous uncle in Aberdeenshire, he returned to seek his fortune in his native town.



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Soon after his return, Fergusson secured a position as a transcriber of legal papers in the Commissary Clerk's office. The pay was miserably low and he eked it out by copying, in a fine, clear hand, wills, decrees of divorce, and anything else that came in his way, at the not exorbitant rate of a penny farthing a page. To us, looking back upon those times, the post seems, perhaps, one degree more wretched than the gaugership of Burns. But dreary as was the drudgery of endless transcription, it brought him enough to support life in those good old days of cheap living, and while performing the duties of his office with scrupulous punctuality, he found amusement in plenty in the sights and sounds of his native town. He formed an acquaintance with the actors of the little theater which had succeeded in establishing itself in Edinburgh, and a seat in the Shakespeare box was reserved for him at every performance. He was passionately fond of music, particularly of his native Scotch airs.

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His love of company and good cheer soon introduced him to the club life of the taverns. He became a frequenter of Luckie Middlemist's, where gin was sold for five shillings a gallon, of Robin Gibb's and Indian Peter's in the precincts of the law courts. He knew the shades of "Pandemonium," where the salamanders, as the members called themselves, were wont to swill

"The comforts of a burning gill."

In due time his fame as a poet and his talent as a singer introduced him to the famous Cape Club, a body which lived in a perpetual high jinks of the sort described by Scott in *Guy Mannering*. Every member — and the members embraced all sorts and conditions of men, from Lancashire, the comic actor, and Raeburn, the most famous of Scotch portrait painters, to Gavin Wilson, the poeticizing shoemaker, and Deacon Brodie, the notorious burglar — was dubbed a knight and received

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a nickname founded upon some adventure which had befallen him. Fergusson received the title of Sir Precentor, and took his seat among such worthy peers as Sir Hayloft, Sir Beefsteaks, and Sir Old Wife. A song of Fergusson's written for the Cape Club, and still in manuscript among the Laing papers in the Library of Edinburgh University, celebrates the feasts of the Cape Knights upon Welsh rabbit, Glasgow herring, caller tippeny and porter, — cheap banquets, certainly, where “six-pence would purchase a crown's worth of bliss,” — and inveighs with startling frankness against the folly of the man who would abandon these revels for the embraces of the strange woman.

It is, perhaps, deserving more than a passing notice that woman, strange or otherwise, played little or no part in Fergusson's life. He was distinctly a man's man, delighting in the social life of the clubs with their songs and frolics and general good fellowship. The Amandas and Stellas of his English poems are

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evidently mere poetic conventions without basis of reality. In his Scotch poems, where alone his true character appears, a woman's name is barely mentioned except with reprobation. In fact, Fergusson seems to have been as resolute an abstainer from female intercourse as his great successor, Burns, was addicted to it in every shape, from an intrigue with a serving girl to a platonic correspondence with Clarinda. Stevenson has spoken of Fergusson as "a poor, drunken, vicious boy." Drunken he was, no doubt, too often, and drunkenness, we are told in a characteristic Scotch phrase, leads to vice, but in Fergusson's case the second step was never taken.

It was not until some time after his return to Edinburgh that Fergusson appeared in print as a poet, and then his *début* was of the most unpromising sort. The three poems that formed his first contribution to the columns of Ruddiman's Weekly were pastorals of the dullest and most conventional type. Damon,

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Alexis, and Corydon recline on the slopes of the Pentlands and warble responsively of Aurora, Cynthia, and Sol, of the drooping olive and the trembling zephyr. It is all very poor stuff, of the pseudo-classic fashion, then prevalent in England, without a touch of the true Scotch fire which glows through all his poems in the vernacular. The succeeding poems of this year were all English and all equally worthless. Nothing can be more pitiful than the sentimental *Complaint on the Decay of Friendship*, except perhaps the mock heroics of *A Saturday's Expedition*. But with the beginning of the next year Fergusson found his true vein. *The Daft Days* which appeared in January, 1772, was written in a famous vernacular stanza which had been handed down from the courtly poets of the middle ages by David Lindesay and Allan Ramsay. The simplicity, directness, and vividness of the opening lines show at once that the poet has emerged into the freedom of his mother-tongue

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and is no longer painfully attempting to cultivate the olives of the south on the heather-clad hills of his northern land. The faultless mastery of a somewhat difficult metre is in admirable contrast to the stilted measures of his English verse. The lilt of the stanza sets the foot tapping like the music of the famous reel it celebrates.

“Fiddlers! your pins in temper fix,  
And roset well your fiddle sticks,  
But banish vile Italian tricks  
From out your quorum,  
Nor fortes wi’ pianos mix —  
Gie ’s Tullochgorum.”

Fergusson’s flowering time was brief, but rich. From January, 1772, to December, 1773, a series of poems both in English and Scots appeared in Ruddiman’s. The latter were for the most part vivid pictures of Edinburgh life, as Fergusson knew it, such as the *King’s Birthday*, *Caller Oysters*, and the *Rising of the Session*. There were a few broadly realistic sketches of the life and amusements of the

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lower classes, and, by way of contrast, a group of half-humorous, half-sentimental nature poems, such as the *Ode to the Bee*, the *Ode to the Gowdspink* (gold-finch), and *On Seeing a Butterfly in the Street*. Perhaps the most striking of all is *The Farmer's Ingle*, a charmingly sympathetic picture of a peasant's home, which, in addition to its own merits, has the peculiar glory of having inspired the best known and best loved of Scottish poems, the *Cotter's Saturday Night*. It is impossible to compare the two without seeing whence the later and greater poet drew his inspiration; and Burns was honest enough to acknowledge his debt. "Rhyme," he said in a letter to Dr. Moore, "I had given up; but meeting with Fergusson's Scottish Poems, I strung anew my wildly-sounding lyre with emulating vigor."

On the Edinburgh Literati Fergusson's poems made little or no impression. These gentlemen were indeed an Anglophile and rapidly anglicizing set. In 1773 Dr. Johnson noted that the

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conversation of the Scotch grew every day less displeasing to an English ear. "The great, the learned, the ambitious, and the vain," he remarks (and it is probable that few of the *Literati* would escape inclusion under one of these heads), "all cultivate the English phrases and the English pronunciation." And if this were so in daily intercourse, still more was it the case in the written word. Hume was almost childishly eager to avoid a lapse into the vernacular; and Dr. Beattie, author of the once famous and now forgotten *Minstrel*, warned his precocious son so solemnly against the use of "Scottish words and other improprieties" that after he grew up "he would never endure to read what was written in any of the vulgar dialects of Scotland." It is not uninteresting in this matter to note that Fergusson's longest and most ambitious poem, *Auld Reekie*, was dedicated to the future biographer of Beattie, Sir William Forbes, and was treated by that worthy and prosy gentleman with the



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silent scorn that an effusion so full of "Scottish words and other improprieties" deserved. But the common people, not yet anglicized out of their national sentiment and their mother tongue, hailed with delight the advent of a new poet in the racy Doric of their ancestors. A chorus of applause greeted Fergusson as the true successor of Allan Ramsay in suiting his lines to the folk of the hills and braes. The circulation of the paper in which his poems appeared increased beyond expectation, and the poems themselves were copied and reprinted all over Scotland. Toward the close of 1772 he felt justified in collecting his scattered verses into a volume. The little book contained barely a dozen of the Scotch poems and was padded out with a mass of inane English verse, but it met with a surprising success. Fergusson cleared at least £50 by it, a sum twice as large as that which accrued to Burns for his first volume of verse.

The publication of this volume and the en-

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suing golden harvest were the last bright spot in the poet's short career. Early in 1774 his constitution, at no time robust, showed evident signs of giving way under the double strain of desk-work all day and high jinks half the night. There is a silly story which Stevenson seems to have believed of Fergusson's having been frightened into madness by a lurid discourse on Death and Hell pronounced to him by a grim divine amid the appropriate surroundings of a churchyard and a ruined abbey. As a matter of fact the discourse in question was delivered two years before Fergusson's outbreak of insanity. But it is true, and it is by no means surprising, when one considers his early training and the circumstances of his life, that his madness, like Cowper's, took the form of religious mania. He threw all his manuscripts into the fire, abandoned his office work, and refusing all social invitations, sat poring for hours over the Bible. A paraphrase of Job's tremendous

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curse which he composed about this time shows, sadly enough, the nature of his scriptural studies. At one time, indeed, there seemed hopes of his recovery; but an unfortunate accident completed his ruin. Returning late at night from a visit to a friend, he stumbled on the stairs and fell violently to the bottom. He was picked up senseless, and when consciousness returned, his reason was gone. He raved of the work he was destined to accomplish as a minister of the gospel, and grew so violent that it took three men to hold him. It was impossible for him to remain in the poor lodging house his mother kept, and he was accordingly in one of his quiet and apparently lucid moments conveyed in a sedan chair under the pretense of visiting a friend to the Schelles (cells) where pauper lunatics were confined. The yell which the poor wretch set up on discovering where he had been taken still rings in the ears of those who know the story of his brief, unhappy life.

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Confinement in a public lunatic asylum was, in those days, a species of permitted torture. The happiest result that could be wished was a speedy death, and this blessing was soon accorded to Fergusson. His mother and sister visited him the night before he died. He was very weak and broken, but, for the moment, quite sane. He begged his sister to come often and sit with him and complained of the cold he suffered in his fireless cell. When the keeper called the women out at the closing hour, the poor boy — he was only twenty-four — burst into tears and cries. “Do not go yet, mother,” he wailed, “do not leave me, do not go yet.” He died alone and untended that night.

It would be, perhaps, too much to rank Fergusson among the inheritors of unfulfilled renown who rose to greet the risen Adonais. Making every allowance for his brief life and straitened circumstances, it is hardly possible to find in his work the promise of great things cut short by an untimely death. Much has

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been made of his relation to Burns, and Dr. Grosart has pointed out how interpenetrating was Fergusson's influence upon his great disciple. On the other hand, little has been said of his indebtedness to Ramsay, from whom he borrowed most of his metres and many of his subjects. Fergusson stands, indeed, as a connecting link between two greater poets, renewing the fading tradition of the one and preparing the way for the glorious appearance of the other. Yet he is not without merits of his own which raise him above the necessity of being judged merely by the historic estimate. He possessed a real mastery of his craft, a true ear for the national metres and rhymes, an amazing command of the rich vernacular, a true feeling for nature, a sly and pawky humor, and a notable gift of realistic description. His gift for verse was, perhaps, hardly so much a heaven-born genius as an earthly talent, but it was a talent, genuine, versatile, and well-employed.

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Fergusson was above all a national poet. His muse did not, to quote his own picturesque phrase, flee away beyond Parnassus and seek for Helicon, "that heath'nish spring," but was content with Highland whiskey. The Arno and the Tiber — which to be sure he never saw — were to him but "lifeless dowie pools" compared with bonny Tweed, or Forth. At times his nationalism shows itself in amusing, half-humorous, half-chauvinistic, outbursts, as when he falls foul of the professors of St. Andrews for the "superb treat" they had hastened to offer that slanderer of Scotland, Samuel Johnson. The bill of fare which he declares they were in duty bound to set before the Doctor reads like the menu of some St. Andrews club on a Burns anniversary: a haggis, a singed sheep's head, sheep's trotters, brose, blood puddings, a girdle farl (griddle cake), and small ale in a wooden quegh. A St. Andrews dinner to-day would, to be sure, call for stronger drink than small ale. At

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times again he re-echoes in all seriousness the complaints that Allan Ramsay had uttered half a century before as to Scotland's ruin at the hands of the "predominant partner," and he has nothing but hard words for the laird turned politician who seeks his fortune at the English court. Fergusson's position as a national poet is of course by no means unique. Dunbar, Ramsay, Burns, and Scott are poets of Scotland, in a broader sense than his most devoted admirers will claim for Fergusson. But no Scottish poet, whether greater or less than he, has been so peculiarly the poet of Edinburgh and Edinburgh life. Nor does the fact that so many of his poems betray an intimate and loving familiarity with country sights and sounds detract from his claim to be regarded especially as a city poet. Stevenson has told us in his prettiest phrases how peculiarly Edinburgh is linked to the surrounding country. "Into no city does the sight of the country enter so far . . . you catch a glimpse

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of the far-away trees on your walk; and the place is full of theater-tricks in the way of scenery. You peep under an arch, you descend steps that look as if they would lead you in a cellar, you turn to a back-window of a grimy tenement in a lane; — and behold! you are face-to-face with distant and bright prospects. You turn a corner, and there is the sun going down into the Highland hills; you look down an alley, and see ships tacking for the Baltic.” One lover, at least, of the old town reckons among his dearest memories the purple slopes of Arthur’s Seat, most mountain-like of little hills, looming grandly before him every evening of a happy summer when he turned a certain corner in the quiet villa-built suburb where he tarried for a season.

But Fergusson’s poems of nature, charming as they are, would hardly have sufficed to transmit his name to posterity. It is to his poems of town life that the lover of the past turns and turns again with undiminished



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pleasure, to the *Daft Days*, and the *King's Birthday*, to *Caller Oysters*, the *Rising of the Session*, the *Election*, and above all to *Auld Reekie*. As he reads there rises before him a panorama of the old town in the merry bustling years which formed at once the climax and the close of her peculiar prosperity. We can follow the life of the town from the moment when

“Morn with bonny purpie smiles  
Kisses the air-cock of St. Giles”

to the wee sma' hours when the last buck staggers homeward from his revels in the club. The barefoot servant lasses cluster on the turnpike stairs, chattering and complaining of their mistresses' hard discipline. The shops are opening and the “stair-head critics” gather in the Luckenbooths to gossip over neighbors and inquire too curiously into the purposes and antecedents of every stranger who goes by. Geordie Girdwood, the drunken, sore-eyed, withered, little sexton of Greyfriars

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Churchyard is howking up gentle bones in that dismal burying ground. Sandy Fife, the bellman of St. Giles, sets the gill bells ringing, and the burghers leave shop and office for the traditional meridian. Lawyers gather round the site of the ancient cross, pulled down some twenty years before by the over-zealous magistrates upon whose heads Sir Walter was to denounce a minstrel's curse. Or perhaps it is a holiday, the King's Birthday, Hallow-fair, or the day of the Leith races. On such a day the shops are shut early, the clinking of the "tinker billies" in the West Bow is hushed, and the crowd pours out of doors to see and be seen. Mons Meg roars a salute from the castle at noon, and the city guard, "that black banditti," muster for parade. The rabble of the streets gather round and assault them with dirty water and dead cats, the old soldiers repel attacks with pungent Highland expletives, with fire-locks and Lochaber axes. Down on the sands near Leith the browster

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wives are selling bad ale and worse whiskey to a noisy crowd, while the jockeys in red, yellow, and tartan liveries gather for the races. As night falls over the good town the fun and noise redouble. The feeble gleam of Simon Fraser's oil lamps is heightened by flaring torches or horn lanterns in the hands of liveried servants. Wily caddies run about the streets and plunge into darksome alleys on dubious errands. Sedan chairmen, predecessors of our modern night-hawks, stand waiting for a chance to pick up some drunken "birkie." The noisy ten-hour drum calls the sober burgher home from his club, but for the wilder spirits the revel has just begun. From the tall "lands" the nightly effusions splash down upon the pavement and the luckless passengers; and the "flowers of Edinburgh" spread their perfume through the narrow ways. Here comes a bruiser reeling home along the crown of the causeway, pushing all he meets into the dirty gutters. At his heels follow a pack of admir-

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ing macaronis applauding his exploits, but ready to turn tail and run for it, if he is seized by the city guard. And so the night goes on till a pale gleam across the Forth proclaims another day. If by chance that day happens to be the Sabbath, what a sudden change appears in men and manners! Save for the ringing of a hundred church bells, among which that of the Tron Kirk earns a bad pre-eminence by its deafening clamor, all the noises of the town are hushed. Through the unclean streets the roisterous citizens of last night stalk with faces of such portentous piety as if they would make each neighbor think

“They thirst for goodness as for drink.”

Then as now the whole population of the town poured out on a pleasant Sunday afternoon to snatch a breath of country air, and one might catch a glimpse of pretty faces, half hidden by the tantalizing “bon grace,” making for Comely Garden, or the park, to meet their joes.

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The “dandering cit” displays his Sunday braws on Castle hill for “the fool cause of being seen.” The poet himself seeks out the solitudes of Arthur’s Seat, or muses amid the ruins of Holyrood over the vanished glories of Scotland. But we may be sure that, if he withdrew from the crowd, it was only for a short space, and evening found him back in Auld Reekie seated at the table of the Cape Club.

There is no monument to Fergusson in his native town except the tombstone with the somewhat stilted inscription which the loving heart of Robert Burns erected over his half-forgotten grave. Few acts of Burns’ life in Edinburgh are so much to his credit as his pilgrimage to the dreary little churchyard of the Canongate. Like the impulsive, generous, peasant poet he was, Burns threw himself on his knees and with hot tears in his eyes kissed the sacred earth that covered the mouldering body of his predecessor and master. And the homage of Burns has been supplemented by

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that of the latest poet of Auld Reekie. "I may tell you," wrote Stevenson from his South Sea exile, "I may tell you (because your poet is not dead) something of how I feel. We are three Robins who have touched the Scots lyre this last century. Well, one is the world's. He did it, he came off; he is forever; but I, and the other, ah! what bonds we have. Born in the same city; both sickly; both vicious; both pestered — one nearly to madness and one to the madhouse — with a damnatory creed; both seeing the stars and the moon, and wearing shoe-leather on the same ancient stones, under the same pends; down the same closes where our common ancestors clashed in their armour rusty or bright. . . . He died in his acute, painful youth and left the models of the great things that were to come; and the man who came after outlived his green-sickness and faintly tried to parody his finished work."

After all the true monument of a poet is not

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a sculptured bronze or marble, but a green and tender memory in the hearts of men. And if comparatively few to-day remember the “poor white-faced boy who raved himself to death in the Edinburgh mad-house,” yet those few include among their number all who know the literature of the richest of English dialects and all who love the most romantic of British cities. Other poets have sung the praises of Edinburgh, but to her laureateship no other poet has so true a claim as Robert Fergusson.

## The Autobiography of Milton

**B**EFORE the execution of Charles I Milton had been known to some few of his countrymen as a poet, to a larger circle as a vigorous, daring, and somewhat scandalous pamphleteer. On the Continent, with the exception of the Italian friends who still remembered their beautiful, scholarly, and accomplished guest of some twelve years before, it is probable that hardly a handful of men were acquainted with his name. In less than three years from the king's death, however, things had so far changed that Milton had become the most famous, or, perhaps, it would be better to say the most notorious, Englishman alive, with the one exception of his great contemporary Cromwell.



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And this change was due not to any resumption of his long-neglected powers of poetry, but solely to the position which he assumed in those years as the defender with the pen of that republic which the Puritans had established with the sword.

Hardly was the king's blood dry before Milton published the first of his republican pamphlets: *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates: proving that it is Lawfull, and hath been held so through all Ages, for any, who have the Power, to call to account a Tyrant, or wicked King, and after due conviction to depose, and put him to death.* The thoroughgoing partisanship of this work was at once recognized by the new rulers of England, who promptly conferred upon Milton the Latin Secretaryship to the Council of State, a position which brought him into close connection with the leaders of the army and the judges of the late king. In this position Milton became the acknowledged spokesman of the Com-

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monwealth. As such he was ordered to make an attempt to check the reaction toward monarchy which was showing itself in the enthusiastic reception of *Eikon Basilike*, — a book purporting to proceed from the king himself and to contain the prayers and pious meditations of his last days, — by writing something to destroy the credit of that work. It was an ungracious task, but Milton performed it. If he did not convince the people — fifty editions of the *Eikon* were called for within the year to one of Milton's *Eikonoclastes*, the Image-breaker — he at least satisfied his friends in the Council. For Milton's next task, once more at the request of that body, was the defence of his country in the court of European opinion against the onslaught just delivered by Salmasius.

Salmasius, a French Protestant, attached to the Dutch University of Leyden as Professor Extraordinary, was by common consent the most learned man alive. He had been

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engaged by Charles II, then an exile at the Hague, to issue a manifesto in defence of the late king, and had performed his task in a pamphlet of sonorous rhetorical Latin entitled *Defensio Regia*, in which he proclaimed the divine right of kings, and assailed with infinite objurgation the “perfidious, wicked, and parricidal” act of the English who had slain their heaven-sent ruler. It was in answer to this work that Milton published in the spring of 1651 his famous *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio*. The long toil involved in the preparation and composition of this work cost Milton his eyesight. For years his vision, overstrained by the arduous study of his youth, had been failing, and when he began his work on the Defence, he was warned by his medical advisers that if he persisted it would be irreparably lost. But he did not hesitate for a moment. In such a case he says: “I would not have listened to the voice of Æsculapius himself in preference to the

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suggestions of the heavenly monitor within my breast; my resolution was unshaken, though the alternative was either the loss of my sight or the desertion of my duty. . . . I resolved, therefore, to make the short interval of sight which was left me as beneficial as possible to the common weal." About a year after the appearance of the *Defence* the prediction of the doctors was fulfilled and Milton belonged to the fellowship of blind Thamyras and blind Mæonides. Terrible as the affliction of blindness must have been to Milton he never regretted the sacrifice that he had made, but consoled himself to the end of his life by reflecting that he had lost his eyes

"In liberty's defence, my noble task  
Of which all Europe talks from side to side."

Milton did not flatter himself when he represented all Europe as talking of his book. The sensation which it caused was, indeed, prodigious. An unknown Englishman had

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confronted the greatest scholar of the age, exposed his ignorance of history, ridiculed his minute and pedantical learning, and, in conclusion, overwhelmed him with a flood of personal abuse enriched with all the lively billingsgate of classical latinity. "I had expected nothing of such quality from an Englishman," writes a Dutch scholar, rejoicing in the overthrow of the hitherto invincible Salmasius. Naturally, wherever the divine right of kings to oppress their subjects was maintained as an article of belief, Milton's treatise was received with horror. It was burnt by the public hangman at Paris and Toulouse; the Diet of the Holy Roman Empire ordered that all the books of Miltonius should be sought out and confiscated. In England, on the other hand, the book was welcomed with an outburst of applause. All the foreign envoys and ambassadors in London congratulated Milton on his triumph over the enemy of his country; the Council of State

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formally thanked him on behalf of the Commonwealth, and offered him a handsome sum of money, a gift which, it is needless to say, Milton at once refused. He was ready to give his eyes for his country, but he would not accept a money payment for the sacrifice.

Salmasius himself, on the receipt of Milton's book, broke out into a storm of rage. He threatened, says a writer of the time, straightway to send Milton, and the Parliament with him, to perdition. But advancing age, domestic trouble, and possibly also a dread of his terrible antagonist, stayed his hand, and he died in the autumn of 1653 with his reply unfinished. But in the meantime another champion, nameless indeed, but possessed of no mean power of invective, had come to his aid. This was Peter du Moulin, a clergyman who had been expelled from his Yorkshire parish by the Puritan reformers. Not daring to publish his work in England he had sent it over to Holland, where it was received by a

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certain Moir, or Morus, who equipped it with some abusive prefatory matter, saw it through the press, and, in consequence, was generally, in spite of his protestations, regarded as the real author. This book, *Regii Sanguinis Clamor ad Cælum adversus Parricidas Anglicanos* (The Cry of the King's Blood to Heaven against the English Parricides), is from beginning to end one wild tirade against the principles and the leaders of the English Commonwealth. Cromwell is denounced as a hypocrite and said to be as like Mahomet as an egg is like an egg; the guilt of the Jews in the crucifixion of Christ is asserted to be as nothing in comparison with the wickedness of the English who had slain their king; and France is besought to take up arms to avenge his shameful murder. But the choicest epithets of abuse are reserved for Milton. The scurrile author taunts him with his blindness, with his lean, shrivelled, and bloodless form. He styles him a "hunger-

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starved little man of grammar willing to lend his venal pen to the defence of Parricide." Milton is a "bestial blackguard," "a fiendish gallows-bird," "a hideous hangman." In his youth he was expelled from Cambridge for his profligacy and fled into Italy, where he plunged into the most disgraceful vice. On his return he wrote a book on divorce which was little less than a plea for license in crime; when the murder of the king was being debated, he sprang forward and shoved the waverers to the evil side, and finally he had filled the measure of his iniquities by insulting the sacred memory of King Charles. His book had been burnt by the hangman and he himself deserved no better fate.

It was nearly two years before Milton answered this book. During this time he was slowly accustoming himself to the misery of blindness; he had suffered the loss of his wife and his only son, and he was waiting for the threatened work of Salmasius. At last, how-



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ever, in May, 1654, his answer appeared under the title of *Defensio Secunda*. It was, of course, written in Latin for European circulation, and this fact, combined with the baldness of the few translations that have been made, serves to keep it out of the hands of most English readers of to-day. Yet it is in many respects one of the most valuable of Milton's prose works. Its interest to us consists by no means in the savage attack which he directs against Morus, his supposed antagonist; not even in the lofty tribute of praise, at once hearty and independent, which he bestows upon the leaders of his party, Fairfax, Bradshaw, and Cromwell; but most of all in the multitude of autobiographical details which the little book contains. Milton, as every one knows, had a well-grounded respect for himself, and on this occasion he was quicker than ever to resent slanders against his character. For these slanders were directed, not against Milton the individual, but against

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Milton the Englishman, Milton the advocate of his country in the court of Europe. By a series of lies his enemy had sought to render him infamous and so to bring discredit upon the cause he represented. And it is at once in defence of himself and of his cause that Milton speaks, addressing himself to "the whole body of wise men, cities, and nations on the Continent." There is, I think, a pleasant human touch of wounded vanity in the fact that he begins with an account of his personal appearance. "I am not tall, I confess," he says, "yet rather of middle height than short. Nor am I puny; on the contrary, in my youth I was wont to practise fencing daily, and when I wore my sword, as I often did, I thought myself a match for a far stronger man. To-day my spirit and my strength is unchanged, and if my eyes are otherwise, yet they are still clear and bright. My complexion is so fresh that I seem at least ten years younger than I am,

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nor is there a wrinkle on my skin. So much I have been forced to say of my appearance; would that I could as easily refute what this inhuman adversary has said of my blindness."

Later on, after acknowledging the goodness of God shown him even in his blindness, and thanking his devoted friends for their extraordinary kindness, Milton goes on to give that sketch of his life from which all his biographers have drawn so largely. It may be of interest to hear it in his own words. "I was born in London," he says, "of an honourable family; my father was a most upright man, my mother a woman of approved goodness, well known for her charities to the poor. From a child my father destined me to the study of the humanities, which indeed I pursued so eagerly that from my twelfth year on I seldom left my books for my bed before midnight. And this was, in truth, the first cause of my blindness. In addition to the weakness of my eyes I suffered from frequent

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headaches, but none of these things hindered my pursuit of learning. My father had me taught not only in the school, but under various masters at home, until I was so far advanced in the study of languages and philosophy that he sent me to Cambridge, one of our two English universities. Here I studied for seven years, shunning all vice (it may be remembered that Milton's college friends called him the Lady of Christ's) and approved by all good men until I took the degree of M. A. *cum laude*. And then I did not run away to Italy, but of my own accord withdrew to my home, to the deep regret of my friends at college by whom I was not a little esteemed."

"At my father's country house," he continues, "whither he had retired to spend his old age, I passed my time solely in the perusal of classic authors, yet I sometimes visited the city to buy books or to learn something new in mathematics or music, which were then

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my chief delight. Having spent five years in this manner I became desirous of visiting foreign parts, especially Italy, and obtaining my father's consent I set out, attended by a single servant. On my departure the famous Henry Wotton showed himself my friend by writing a letter full of good wishes and of advice most useful to a traveller." This is the famous letter in which Sir Henry praised the "Doric delicacy" of *Comus* and advised Milton to go through Italy, "*pensieri stretti, viso sciolto*," "with thoughts close and face open."

After speaking of his noble and learned acquaintances at Paris, Milton goes on to tell of his travels in Italy. "I stayed two months at Florence where I constantly attended the Academies, which a laudable custom of that city maintains for the promotion of literature and social intercourse." Here he pauses for a moment to recall the names of the Florentine gentlemen who had welcomed

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him so kindly and praised his Latin poems so enthusiastically on his first visit; "the day will never come when I shall lose the pleasant memory of these men." "From Florence I went to Siena, and thence to Rome. I spent two months in exploring the antiquities of that famous city and was treated with the greatest kindness by Lucas Holsten and other men of learning and ability. I went on to Naples, and here, by the good offices of a hermit who had been my companion on the journey, I was introduced to Manso, Marquis of Villa, a noble and venerable gentleman, to whom Tasso, the famous poet, had dedicated his book *On Friendship*. So long as I remained in Naples this gentleman treated me as a dear friend; he showed me about the city, took me into the Viceroy's palace, and even visited me several times at my lodgings. And when I departed, he gravely excused himself for not having shown me more attention, which, he said, my lack of reserve in the matter of re-

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ligion had rendered impossible in such a town as Naples. I was preparing to visit Sicily and Greece when the sad news of civil war in England recalled me, for I thought it disgraceful to travel at ease abroad while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home.

“On my way back to Rome I was warned that the English Jesuits were laying snares for me in case I revisited that city, because they thought I had spoken too boldly about religion. For I had made it a rule never to introduce the subject of religion in that country, but at the same time not to conceal my own opinions, no matter what the consequences, in case I were questioned as to my faith. And so I returned to Rome, where for two months’ space, in the very city of the Pope, I openly defended the true religion, as I had done before, whenever it was attacked in my presence. And by God’s grace I returned unharmed to Florence, where my

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friends received me as joyfully as if I had returned to my fatherland.”

After a brief account of his travels in Northern Italy, Milton speaks of his visit to Geneva on the way home, and the mention of this city, from which his supposed calumniator, Morus, had departed under a cloud of scandal, leads him to call God to witness “that in all those cities where vice is so open I lived pure and untouched by crime or shame, perpetually reflecting that though I might escape the eyes of men, I could not that of God.” It is an interesting coincidence that Milton, on being asked at Geneva for his autograph, wrote down from memory two lines of *Comus*,

“If virtue feeble were  
Heaven itself would stoop to her,”

and added below them, as an attestation of his belief, “*Cælum, non animum, muto, dum trans mare curro*”: “I change my abode, but not my opinions, when I cross the sea.”



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“On my return to England,” he continues, “I rented a house in London large enough for myself and my books, and betook myself with joy to my interrupted studies.” This is the time when Milton wrote his last long Latin poem, the *Epitaphium Damonis*, in memory of his lost friend, Diodati, and when he was planning a great epic in his mother tongue on the story of Arthur, in the hope, he says, “that I might perhaps leave something so written to after times as they should not willingly let it die.”

From this “quiet and still air of delightful studies” Milton was soon called on to “embark in a troubled sea of noises and hoarse disputes.” He enumerates in the *Defence* the various pamphlets which he had written, first in the controversy on church government which was then raging, and next to promote the cause of “that true liberty which is to be sought within, and not without, the mind, not in battle, but in the right conduct of life.” To

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this end he wrote first his pamphlets on divorce, "for that man makes a vain boast of liberty in the polling place or senate house who at home endures a slavery most disgraceful to a man, slavery to an inferior." Further, he discussed briefly the education of children, "than which nothing does more to train the mind in virtue, that sole source of true internal liberty." "Also I wrote the *Areopagitica*, on the liberty of the press, to prevent the censorship from remaining longer in the hands of a few badly educated men who seldom allowed aught to appear that was above the level of the vulgar mind."

Finally Milton brings the story of his life down to the date at which he was writing, by speaking of the controversy in which he became engaged after the execution of the king. He denies that he urged on the regicides; his first book on the subject did not appear till after the king's death and was written "rather to compose the minds of men than to de-

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cide anything in the case of Charles, which was not my business, but that of the magistrates, and was, moreover, settled already. I did my work for church and state within my own four walls: I received no reward for it except that I was let alone. Other men got money or office for nothing; but no one ever saw me canvassing for an office, or using the influence of friends to secure a favor; no one ever saw me hanging about the doors of the House with a beggar's face or spending my time in the ante-chambers of committee-rooms. I stayed at home and lived on my own means. I was, indeed, at work on a *History of England* when the Council of State most unexpectedly demanded my assistance in foreign affairs. At the request of the Council I wrote the *Eikonoklast* in answer to the *Eikon*. I did not insult the dead monarch, as I am accused of doing, but I verily thought that Queen Truth was more to be preferred than King Charles. Finally, when Salmasius pub-

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lished his book, there was no long dispute as to who should answer it. I was then present in the Council, and all its members at once and with one accord named me. So much, Morus, I have written about myself to stop your mouth and to expose your falsehoods.”

I have translated freely, condensing and omitting much from this the longest autobiographical passage in the works of Milton. It is, however, only one of many. There is, for instance, a long introduction to the second book of *The Reason of Church Government*, in which Milton speaks of the causes that have induced him to lay aside the epic poem that he was meditating and take part in the church controversies of the time. Here he praises the “ceaseless diligence and care” which his father had lavished upon his education, and mentions the fact that he himself had been from a child destined to the service of the church: “till coming to some maturity of years and perceiving what tyranny had in-

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vaded the church, that he who would take orders must subscribe slave, and take an oath withal, which, unless he took with a conscience that would retch, he must either straight perjure, or split his faith; I thought it better to prefer a blameless silence before the sacred office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing." Such a passage as this goes far to explain that torrent of wrath which Milton, "church-outed by the prelates," pours upon the heads of the corrupted clergy in *Lycidas*.

But this preface is, perhaps, even more remarkable for its revelation of the conception of the great poem which was already in 1641 dawning in Milton's mind. He had, it appears, renounced his first half-formed plan of writing in Latin, "not caring once to be named abroad, but content with these British islands as my world." But there was still much that remained to be decided, the choice of a subject, for example, "what king or

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knight might be chosen in whom to lay the pattern of a Christian hero." And there was the question of the form which the poem should take, "whether that epic whereof the two poems of Homer are a model," or "those dramatic constitutions wherein Sophocles and Euripides reign." Above all there was the long and arduous preparation necessary before the poem could even be begun, "industrious and select reading, steady observation, insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs," for the poem, when at last it should appear, was to be a work "not to be raised from the heat of youth, or the vapours of wine; like that which flows at waste from the pen of some vulgar amourist, or the trencher fury of a rhyming parasite; nor to be obtained by the invocation of dame Memory and her siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternal Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his seraphim, with the hallowed fire of his altar,

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to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases.”

An even more interesting autobiographical passage occurs in the *Apology for Smeectymnuus*, published in 1642. This pamphlet was written in answer to a savage attack upon Milton composed by Bishop Hall, the leader of the Episcopal party, and his son. In the address to the reader prefixed to this attack it was asserted that Milton had spent his youth “loitering, bezzling, and harlotting,” that he had been “vomited out of the University into a suburb sink of London,” and that, wherever he passed his mornings, he spent his afternoons “at the playhouses or the bordelli.” No more absurd charge could have been invented against Milton than that of idleness and vice, and yet we can hardly regret the recklessness of his adversaries, since it gave the poet the opportunity for such a magnificent self-vindication. After thanking his opponent for the “commodious lie” that he was

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expelled from Cambridge, inasmuch as it gives him "apt occasion to acknowledge publicly with all grateful mind that more than ordinary favour and respect, which I found above any of my equals at the hands of those courteous and learned men, the fellows of that college wherein I spent some years," Milton goes on to speak of his present mode of life, his studies, and his character.

"My morning haunts are where they should be, at home," he says, "not sleeping nor concocting the surfeits of an irregular feast, but up and stirring, in winter often ere the sound of any bell awake men to labor or to devotion; in summer as oft with the bird that first rouses, or not much tardier, to read good authors or cause them to be read, till the attention be weary, or memory have its full fraught: then with useful and generous labours preserving the body's health and hardiness to render lightsome, clear, and not lumpish obedience to the mind, to the cause of religion, and to



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our country's liberty, when it shall require firm hearts in sound bodies to stand and cover their stations, rather than to see the ruin of our protestation, and the inforcement of a slavish life." It would seem from these last words that Milton was already anticipating the civil war which broke out shortly after. Masson, indeed, thinks that the passage shows that Milton took part in the military exercises of the London citizens.

Speaking of his studies Milton says that his first delight was "the smooth elegiac poets." Probably the reference is especially to Ovid, whom we know that Milton, like Shakespeare before him, honored somewhat above his due. Yet, he continues, "if I found those authors anywhere speaking unworthy things of themselves, or unchaste of those names which before they had extolled, this effect it wrought with me, from that time forward their art I still applauded, but the men I deplored; and above them all preferred the two famous re-

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nowners of Beatrice and Laura, who never write but honor of them to whom they devote their verse, displaying sublime and pure thoughts without transgression. And it was not long after when I was confirmed in this opinion that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter of laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things.”

“Next I betook me among those lofty fables and romances” (Milton is thinking here, perhaps, of his favorite “our sage and serious poet, Spenser”) “which recount in solemn cantos the deeds of knighthood founded by our victorious kings. There I read it in the oath of every knight, that he should defend to the expense of his best blood, or of his life, if it so befell him, the honour and chastity of virgin or matron; from whence even then I learned what a noble virtue chastity sure must be, to the defence of which so many worthies,

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by such a dear adventure of themselves, had sworn. . . . Only this my mind gave me, that every free and gentle spirit, without that oath, ought to be born a knight, nor needed to expect the gilt spur, nor the laying of a sword upon his shoulder, to stir him up, both by his counsel and his arms, to secure and protect the weakness of any attempted chastity. So that even these books, which to many others have been the fuel of wantonness and loose living . . . proved to me so many incitements to the love and steadfast observation of that virtue which abhors the society of bordellos.”

“Thus from the laureate fraternity of poets, riper years and the ceaseless round of study and reading led me to the shady spaces of philosophy; but chiefly to the divine volumes of Plato and his equal Xenophon; where if I should tell ye what I learnt of chastity and love, I mean that which is truly so, whose charming cup is only virtue, which she bears

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in her hand to those who are worthy (the rest are cheated with a thick, intoxicating potion, which a certain sorceress, the abuser of love's name, carries about); and how the first and chiefest office of love begins and ends in the soul, . . . it might be worth your listening, readers." And after a reference to his training in the precepts of Christianity, where he learnt that unchastity in a man, "though not commonly thought so, must be much more deflouring and dishonourable than in a woman," Milton winds up this *apologia pro vita sua* with a proud confidence of victory over his slanderer: "Thus large have I purposely been, that if I have been justly taxed with this crime, it may come upon me after all this my confession with a ten-fold shame."

I need not pursue my task further, I think, of setting Milton to speak for himself and show us in his own noble words what manner of man he was. I have selected passages

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from two of the least read of his prose works in English, and from a Latin treatise which, I fancy, is seldom read at all. But there is hardly any work of Milton, that most intensely self-conscious of authors, from which it would not be possible to learn something about the man behind the work. The divorce tracts, for example, at once reveal to us his lofty ideal of marriage, a subject on which he is the most generally misunderstood of men, and explain simply enough the catastrophe of his own first attempt to realize this ideal. And the *Areopagitica*, perhaps the noblest of all his pamphlets, is on fire with that love of freedom in thought, speech, and action, which was the dominating principle of Milton's life. And as for his poems, from the *Sonnet on being arrived to the age of twenty-three* to the *Samson* written in his blind old age when "fallen on evil days and evil tongues," there is, I believe, hardly one in which we may not discover some exquisite touch of self-revela-

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tion. Milton could never, we may be sure, have been a dramatist of the first order, if for no other reason than that it was impossible for him to conceal his own personality behind the characters he created.

I have sometimes thought that it would be a pleasant and not unprofitable task for a student of literature to go through the letters, essays, and poems of Milton in detail, to pick out the autobiographical passages, and to arrange them in such an order that the poet might himself tell us the story of his inner and his outer life from boyhood till old age. Such an autobiography certainly would be briefer than the enormous encyclopædia of Milton and his times by Professor Masson which serves to-day for the standard life of the poet. But, unless I am much mistaken, the ordinary reader would learn more about Milton's personality from such a compilation than from the six huge volumes in which, if the truth must be told, the poet too often dis-

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appears amid a baffling crowd of contemporaries, more or less obscure, as the outline of some splendid forest tree is often hidden from the spectator by the lower growths that cluster round it.

It is not only in Professor Masson's vast work, however, that the personality of Milton is obscured. On the contrary, I believe, there is no English poet, of whose life we know so much, whose true character, at the same time, has been so generally misunderstood. In his own day the clouds of partisan warfare hung thick around him; in our own time he has too often been exalted into a remotely superhuman figure. Or if at times a critic makes the effort to bring Milton back to earth again and portray him as a man of like passions with ourselves, the reaction against the ordinary view is too likely to end in an attempt to belittle the heroic figure. Here, for example, is Professor Saintesbury's rough sketch: "Milton's character was not

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an amiable one, nor even wholly estimable. It is probable that he never in the course of his whole life did anything that he considered wrong, but unfortunately examples are not far to seek of the facility with which desire can be made to confound itself with deliberate approval. He was an exacting if not tyrannical husband and father; he held in the most exaggerated fashion the doctrine of the superiority of man to woman; his egotism in a man who had accomplished less would be half ludicrous and half disgusting; his faculty of appreciation beyond his own immediate tastes and interests was small; his intolerance surpassed that of an inquisitor." Such a caricature may, perhaps, have its use as an offset to the uncritical and boyish idealization of Macaulay's famous essay; but it can hardly be accepted as a realistic portrait of Milton.

The golden mean between such extremes might perhaps be found by some such method as I have suggested above. Certainly if we



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would obtain a true portrait of Milton, "in his habit as he lived," we might well spend the time and care which others have devoted to ransacking dusty archives or to evolving an ideal figure from the depths of self-consciousness, in the study and sympathetic interpretation of those passages of his works in which the poet reveals to us his aims and hopes and beliefs and sympathies, in what I have ventured to call the autobiography of Milton.

## The Personality of Dr. Johnson

IT is almost impossible for us, looking back over the century and a quarter which separates us from the death of Dr. Johnson, to realize the position which for thirty years he had held in the world of English letters. And when at last by an effort of the historic imagination we attain to some imperfect conception of his place, we ask ourselves with something like amazement to what this undisputed supremacy was due. Johnson was the last literary autocrat of England, the "great Cham of literature," as his contemporary, Smollet, aptly called him. He filled the throne which had been occupied before him by Pope, by Dryden, and by Ben Jonson, each of them, if not a greater man, assuredly

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a greater writer. Yet it may well be questioned whether any of them ever received such undivided homage as was accorded during the last years of his life to Samuel Johnson. It was not on account of the lack of fellow-workers in the field of polite letters that Johnson was so honored. His claim to recognition rested upon his work as a moral philosopher, a prose writer, and a poet. Now in depth and originality of thought he was surpassed by at least three of his contemporaries, Hume, Burke, and Adam Smith. As a master of prose style Johnson is now, perhaps, too generally undervalued, yet in the weightier matters, such as invention, humor, and power of characterization, his work is not to be compared with that of such masters as Fielding and Goldsmith. And as for poetry, it is only by a certain effort of the will that the modern reader trained in the romantic school of Tennyson and Keats, and looking back from them to Milton and Shakespeare, can

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admit the claim of Johnson's sonorous and rhetorical couplets to be poetry at all.

The fact seems to be that Johnson's dictatorship was due to his personality rather than to his productions, to his spoken rather than to his written words. The greatest writers have lost themselves in their work: Homer is only a name; Shakespeare's true self is barely discernible through his plays and poems. Johnson, on the other hand, has left the impress of his strong, acute, yet sharply limited personality on every line he wrote. In one of his outbursts of dogmatic criticism Johnson says, most unjustly, that no man could have fancied that he read *Lycidas* with pleasure had he not known the author. It would be far less unjust, and probably a close approximation to the truth, to say that no man to-day reads the *Rambler* or *Rasselas* except as he is attracted to them by the fame of their author, and with the hope, not always realized, of finding in them the cause and justification of that fame.

## *The Personality of Dr. Johnson*

Naturally in our day, when the whole aspect of the world has been changed by the economic revolution, the discoveries of science, and the triumph of democracy, the cause and justification of Johnson's fame is harder to discover in his books than it was in his own time. And even in his own time, as has already been suggested, it was probably rather to his commanding personality than to his works that his supremacy was due. Fortunately for us his personality still survives, imperishable and wholly independent of his work. By some happy fate, as if in compensation for the hardships and miseries of his youth, he encountered in middle life the man who was to make him immortal. No happier conjunction of men could be imagined than that of Samuel Johnson and James Boswell. Johnson loved to talk, Boswell to listen; Johnson was perhaps the most entertaining and effective talker that ever lived, Boswell was indisputably the best reporter of conver-

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sation; Johnson asserted his right, almost tyrannically at times, to be the absolute lord of every society into which he entered, Boswell was willing either to efface himself, or to obtrude himself just far enough to catch the great man's eye and provoke one of those outbursts which delighted the hearers at that time and have delighted thousands of readers ever since. Johnson was pardonably proud, and somewhat over quick to take offense, though always eager to forgive; Boswell, on the other hand, was almost humiliatingly wanting in self-respect, incapable of resentment, and only too ready to be forgiven. Finally, Johnson's ideas, beliefs, and principles were as firm and immutable as bronze; Boswell's mind was wax to receive and marble to retain; and thus the hero left upon his worshiper an indelible imprint which has transmitted his own true form and features to all posterity. The two men were made for each other, and if Boswell has achieved

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immortality in the company of Johnson, he has obtained no more than his just reward. It is quite time to have done with Macaulay's silly paradox that it was only because he was so great a fool that Boswell wrote so great a book. Carlyle answered that paradox at the time. "Fals<sup>r</sup> hypothesis," he says, "never rose in human soul." Unfortunately the popularity of Macaulay's essay on Boswell's *Life of Johnson* stands to Carlyle's work on the same subject in inverse ratio to the real value of their respective pictures of hero and biographer; and it is permissible, therefore, in view of the gross injustice done to one who was not only Johnson's biographer, but his dear friend, to quote the too little known words of Carlyle's verdict. "Boswell wrote a good book," so the final judgment runs, "because he had a heart and an eye to discern wisdom, and an utterance to render it forth; because of his free insight, his lively talent, above all, of his love and child-like open-minded-

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ness. . . . Neither James Boswell's good book, nor any other good thing, in any time, nor in any place, was, is, or can be performed by any man in virtue of his *badness*, but always and solely in spite thereof."

It must not be forgotten that the picture of Johnson that Boswell gives us is a picture of Johnson in his declining years, his character formed, his work, for the most part, done. Johnson was already fifty-two when Boswell met him, and although he had yet twenty-three years of life before him these were tranquil and idle years compared with the misery and grinding toil of his earlier life. The period of his acquaintance with Boswell was one long Indian summer in which the storm-beaten hero rested from his labors and enjoyed, so far as the deep-rooted melancholy of his nature would allow, the sunshine of prosperity. The Johnson whom we all know in the famous biography, the great dictator of literature, the autocrat of the famous club,



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the revered philosopher whose grotesque antics moved his friends to alternate awe and laughter, the tender-hearted and rough-mannered man who bullied the strong and bowed humbly to the weak, was the product of a long life amid an environment unknown to Boswell except by report, and of an heredity which, had he known, he could not have appreciated. Boswell has furnished us with full materials for an estimate of Johnson's character; but before we can be in a position to estimate it rightly, we must know something of the process by which that character was evolved.

Samuel Johnson was born in the cathedral town of Lichfield in 1709. His father, Michael, was a book-seller, a bigoted Tory and a man of learning, but superstitious, utterly careless of money matters, and afflicted with the constitutional melancholy which was characteristic of his famous son. Johnson, it must be owned, had good grounds for melancholy; he inherited the taint of scrofula and

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in early childhood almost wholly lost his sight from this disease. In spite of his great physical strength, he suffered throughout his life from a variety of ailments, he was attacked by paralysis in his old age, and finally fell a victim to a terrible complication of gout, dropsy, kidney trouble, and lung disease. When we remember the vociferous lamentations with which Carlyle bewailed his attacks of dyspepsia and insomnia, or the less noisy but more terrible misanthropy with which Swift revenged himself upon a world which, at least, was innocent of his physical sufferings, we find something truly noble in the unshaken fortitude with which Johnson faced his miseries. Their one result upon his mind, it would seem, was a somewhat scornful treatment of the affected sorrows and sentimental troubles with which his age was so plenteously endowed.

The usual tales are told of Johnson's precocity. In spite of his deficient eyesight he

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read prodigiously. One of the most characteristic of the anecdotes preserved by Boswell tells how the boy climbed up a ladder in his father's shop in search of some apples which he fancied his brother had hidden behind a huge folio on the upper shelf. The apples were undiscoverable, but the book proved to be a copy of Petrarch whose name Johnson had come across somewhere in his voluminous reading. Hunger was forgotten in the delight of a new discovery, and the boy sat upon the ladder with the folio on his knees, reading until he had finished a great part of the book. The story is typical of much of Johnson's life and, in particular, of his method of study, accidental, spasmodic, intense and concentrated while the fit was on, sluggish and intermittent when the moment passed. If he had a subject to get up, he invariably neglected it. When preparing his edition of Shakespeare, he declined to avail himself of Garrick's unrivalled collection of early editions and con-

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temporary plays because he thought that Garrick had not pressed him sufficiently to make use of them. When he was composing the *Lives of the Poets*, he snubbed Boswell for busying himself to secure materials, and declared that he didn't care to know about Pope. On the other hand, he probably read more miscellaneous printed matter than any man of his century. With all his reading, however, he was the very opposite of the typical book-worm. No creature is more universally despised by normal boys than a young book-worm, but Johnson even in his school-days exercised an undisputed sway over his associates. He did his friends' tasks for them, he served as the standard by which every boy's scholarship was tested, and he rode triumphantly to school in the morning mounted upon a comrade's back, with two others supporting him on either hand.

Johnson was sent up to Oxford on the promise, never fulfilled, of pecuniary support

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from certain of his father's friends. The anecdotes that are told of his college life are extremely characteristic. On his entrance he amazed his tutor by quoting Macrobius, he stayed away from lectures to slide on the ice in Christ Church meadows, he neglected the required exercises in Latin verse, but latinized a poem of Pope's in such a masterly fashion as to attract the notice of the whole university. His old master told Boswell that Johnson at college was a "gay, frolicsome fellow, caressed and loved by all about him"; but Johnson himself told another story: "Oh, sir," he said, "I was mad and violent. It was bitterness which they mistook for frolic. I was miserably poor and I thought to fight my way by my literature and by my wit, so I disregarded all power and all authority." He was generally seen "lounging at the college gate with a circle of young students round him, whom he was entertaining with his wit and keeping from their studies, if not spiring up to re-

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bellion against the college discipline." Yet when one of these admiring friends put a pair of shoes at his door to replace the broken pair through which his feet were showing, Johnson threw them away in a passion of resentment. And this although he had already ceased to attend a highly valued course of lectures because his shabby dress made him, as he thought, an object of contempt to strangers. Johnson loved learning much, but independence more. The youth who threw away the shoes was the father of the man who wrote the famous letter to Lord Chesterfield "proclaiming to the listening world that Patronage should be no more."

Johnson added but little to his mental equipment at Oxford; indeed he said long afterwards that he knew as much when he went there at eighteen as he did when he was fifty; but he acquired something better than learning. From an early age he had been something of a free-thinker and a careless

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talker about religion, probably more to show his wit than for any other reason. But during his short stay at Oxford — he was in residence only a little more than a year — he read that strangely powerful book, *Law's Call to a Serious Life*, and under its influence became what he continued to his death, not only a sincere believer, but a stalwart champion of revealed religion. And this is the more remarkable since, with hardly an exception, the eminent men of his day, Bolingbroke, Pope, Hume, and Voltaire, were either open infidels or complacent and self-contented Deists. We must not forget, of course, the Evangelical movement under the fervent apostleship of Wesley and Whitfield, but this movement was essentially an appeal from the intellect to the emotional faculties of men, and as such wholly alien to the strong sense and self-restrained nature of Johnson. His prayers were made in his closet or written in his note-books, not performed with unction upon the corners of the

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streets. The traditional forms of the English church gave full scope for his exercises of devotion, and he was Tory enough to insist upon the maintenance in all her privileges of the national church; but beneath all forms he recognized, as perhaps no other man did in his day, the essential unity of religion. In the true spirit of a sincere believer he was accustomed to reproach himself bitterly for his failure to live up to the principles of his creed, but to us, looking back upon his blameless life and his thousand silent deeds of charity, he seems the very embodiment of Saint James's definition of religion.

Less is known of Johnson during the period between his departure from Oxford and his arrival in London than at any other time of his life. His father's health and business were failing together and he died in 1731 on the verge of bankruptcy. Of his little inheritance of £20, Johnson laid by eleven and went out into the world to seek his living. He



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found it no easy task. He tried to turn his education to account as a teacher in a little school, but found it as disagreeable for him to teach as it was for the boys to learn. He earned a few guineas by writing and translating for a provincial bookseller. He fell in love with and married a widow of nearly twice his age, a fact which for some reason has proved a source of inextinguishable mirth to vulgar minds. It is impossible to be angry with the born mimic, David Garrick, who in after years used to convulse London drawing-rooms by a caricature of the love-scenes between Johnson and the widow, which he had witnessed with a school-boy's apish delight in their ludicrous side; but it is not easy to forgive Macaulay for abusing the woman whom Johnson loved as "a tawdry painted grandmother who accepted his addresses with a readiness that did her little honor." Not little, but greatly to her honor was it that she had eyes to pierce beneath the rough exterior of

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this poor, ugly, and miserable scholar, and to see the strength and sincerity of his love; nor less that she had the intelligence to recognize in him "the most sensible man she ever saw in her life."

With the money that his wife brought him Johnson once more tried his hand at teaching and opened a school near Lichfield. But his second attempt was no more successful than his first. Not more than eight boys ever attended the school, and after a hopeless struggle of a year or two, Johnson abandoned it and went up to London to seek his fortune with two-pence ha'penny in his pocket and an unfinished drama in his portmanteau.

London was at that time, to a degree which it has never since been, the intellectual and literary center of the English-speaking world. Indeed, if we except the brilliant literary coterie which a few years later gathered around Hume in Edinburgh, London may be said to have enjoyed throughout the middle of

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the eighteenth century a practical monopoly of Englishmen of wit and letters. It offered the only field in which a man of Johnson's tastes and abilities might rise to fame and fortune. Of these two, fame was in that day far casier of attainment than fortune. Macaulay has drawn a memorable picture of the depressed state of letters at the time of Johnson's arrival in London, and of the miseries suffered there by starving authors. As usual with Macaulay the picture is overdrawn, but there is no doubt that his main contention is true. The golden age of patronage had passed away, the age in which the writer appealed directly to a large and liberal reading public had not yet arrived; and in the interregnum, "struggling between two worlds, one dead, one powerless to be born," Johnson and his fellows had a long and bitter contest with all the ills that then assailed the scholar's life,

"Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the jail."

But where weaker men succumbed, Johnson's

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courage, industry, and strong self-command brought him nobly through the battle.

Johnson's emergence from the sea in which so many of his fellows sank was, indeed, a striking example of the survival of the fittest. Of all the struggling men of letters in his day no one was so well fitted to make his hands keep his head. His native independence of mind kept him from the snares of patronage in which so brilliant a genius as his friend Savage perished miserably; his proud self-confidence prevented him from becoming the abject slave of the book-sellers. His encounter with Osborne, one of the most prominent publishers of the day, has become traditional. He is said to have knocked him down with a folio Bible and to have put his foot upon his neck in sign of triumph, but Johnson told Boswell the story in a simpler fashion: "Sir, he was impertinent to me, and I beat him;" and he added later, "I have beat many a fellow, but the rest had the wit to hold

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their tongues.” Although by no means contemptuous of the good things of life, he could and often did live on as near nothing a day as was humanly possible, and the want of a dinner never lowered the quality or quantity of his literary product. On the contrary, his natural indolence seemed to need the spur of sharp necessity. When free from care he was, in the fine phrase of his day, “vastly idle”; but he was at need capable of the most extraordinary exertions. He wrote forty-eight printed pages of the *Life of Savage* at a sitting; he began and finished his story of *Rasselas* in a single week. And he was as versatile as he was energetic. For the *Gentleman's Magazine*, with which he became connected soon after his arrival in London, he wrote verses in Latin, Greek, and English, translations from French and Italian, essays, biographical sketches, prefaces, and addresses to the subscribers. Perhaps of all his labors for the magazine that which attracted most

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attention was his version of the debates in Parliament. The House of Commons at that time and for years afterwards strictly prohibited any account of its proceedings; but the enterprising publisher of the *Gentleman's Magazine* managed to bribe the doorkeepers to admit men who reported to him the subjects of discussion, the names of the speakers, and a few scanty notes of their arguments. Out of these materials Johnson composed, under the title of *Debates of the Senate of Lilliput*, a series of speeches which, in the judgment of his contemporaries, surpassed the eloquence of Demosthenes, and greatly increased the sale of the magazine.

In spite of his poverty, however, as soon as Johnson discovered that these speeches were being received as the genuine orations delivered in Parliament, he ceased to compose them, "for," said he, "I would not be accessory to the propagation of falsehood." As this fact bears witness to Johnson's tenderness of

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conscience, another incident is equally enlightening as to his political prejudices. When praised for the impartiality with which he had distributed reason and eloquence, he answered: "That is not quite true. I saved appearances tolerably well; but I took care that the *Whig dogs* should not have the best of it."

It was fortunate for Johnson in more ways than one that at the crisis of his life he boldly plunged into the world of London. Had he remained in the provinces he would have rotted in obscurity or collapsed under the depressing influence of an environment to which he was in no way adapted. On the other hand, had circumstances permitted him to live like Gray in the dignified seclusion of a college fellowship, he would probably have done even less work than Gray and in the end gone melancholy mad. He had not the slightest taste for country life, and ridiculed with boisterous scorn the supposed delights of soli-

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tude. Possibly on account of his deficient eyesight he had no appreciation whatever of the beauties of nature; one prospect, he said, resembles another very closely, and one blade of grass is exactly like another. The demon of melancholy, "a horrible hypochondria, with perpetual irritation, fretfulness, and impatience, with dejection, gloom, and despair which made existence misery," was not to be exorcised by solitary walks in country fields. What Johnson needed was not only work, but society, close contact with all sorts and conditions of men, friendships, enmities, whatever could draw him out of himself and make him forget. All this he found in London. No man of his time knew so well the great city, and all the varieties of life contained within its walls. He slept with beggars, or wandered houseless through the streets at night with a brother poet; he slanged a bargeman, laughed and jested with Garrick's actresses, or talked "with profound respect,



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but still in a firm, manly manner, with his sonorous voice," to Majesty itself. "I look upon a day as lost," he said, "in which I do not make a new acquaintance." The fact that he never lost a friend except by death shows that he was as tenacious of old friendships as he was eager to acquire new. He had, in fact, a very genius for friendship, and the circle that gathered round him in his later years included not only poets, scholars, and men of letters, but the most prominent painters, actors, musicians, doctors, and statesmen in England.

Johnson's attitude toward the great city where he suffered so much and gained so much is not to be judged from his poem, *London*. The bitterness of that early satire is due in part to the tone of the author from whom it is imitated, in part, perhaps, to the temper of Savage to whom it was addressed. But even in this early work it may be noted that while the abuse of the town is vivid and direct, —

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“Here malice, rapine, accident conspire,  
And now a rabble rages, now a fire;  
Here falling houses thunder on your head,  
And here a female atheist talks you dead,—”

the contrasting praises of the country are absolutely commonplace and artificial, perhaps the only insincere lines that Johnson ever wrote. We can well imagine with what ridicule he would in later years have chastised a presumptuous friend who urged him to fulfil the prophecy of Thales and, abandoning the follies of the town, “fly for refuge to the wilds of Kent.” London was no stony-hearted step-mother to Johnson, but an *Alma Mater* dearer even than his own mother university. He preferred Fleet Street to the finest prospect in the Highlands; declared that the full tide of human existence was realized in all its magnitude at Charing Cross, and summed up the feeling of thousands of lovers of the town before and since his day in the words, “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.”

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It would take too long to trace the evolution of Johnson from the unknown correspondent of the *Gentleman's Magazine* to the dictatorship of letters where Boswell found him; but a few of the landmarks of his career may be noted. His *London* in 1738 brought him ten guineas and the praise of Pope. His *Life of Savage* in 1744 attracted considerable attention, not only from the interest of its subject, but from the vividness of its characterization and the profound gravity of its morality. It is written in Johnson's heaviest and most polysyllabic style; but it is worth reading even today for its dexterous blending of moral criticism and Christian charity. Indeed, it is at times almost amusing to see how far Johnson's warm heart leads him to go in defence of a friend, even when that friend was so thorough-paced a blackguard as the unfortunate Savage.

By 1747 Johnson had acquired sufficient reputation to justify a syndicate of booksellers

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in contracting with him for the production of an English Dictionary, at that time a great desideratum in the language. On this work he spent in all eight years, and its appearance may be said to have laid the capstone on his reputation. As a great lexicographer, — the title by which he was so often known in the eighteenth century, — Johnson was disqualified first by his profound ignorance of all other Germanic languages and even of the earlier stages of his own tongue, and secondly by his constitutional disinclination toward laborious and minute research. On the other hand, his definitions were for the most part excellent, although at times, when his partisanship got the better of his judgment and he defined excise as “a hateful tax levied upon commodities and adjudged by wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid,” or a pension as “pay given to a State hireling for treason to his country,” they were calculated rather to make the cynic laugh and the judi-

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cious grieve. Sometimes, indeed, a flash of Johnson's sturdy good humor and native wit breaks through the cloud of definitions and illustrations like a ray of sunshine, as where he defines Grub Street as a place "much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems," or a lexicographer as "a writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge."

Johnson received the respectable sum of nearly \$8,000 for his work, equivalent in purchasing power to perhaps three times the amount to-day. Out of this, however, he had to pay all the expenses of preparing the book for the press, and long before the work was done he had spent all that he was to receive for it. His procrastination delayed the book several years beyond the date for which it was originally announced and completely exhausted the publishers' patience. "Thank God, I have done with him," said Miller, the head of the syndicate, when the last sheets came in.

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"I am glad," said Johnson, when this was reported to him, "that he thanks God for anything." It is characteristic both of the man and the times that within a year after the appearance of his great work Johnson was arrested for debt and had to be bailed out by his friend, Samuel Richardson.

The composition of the dictionary by no means engrossed Johnson's attention during the eight years that he was engaged upon it. In 1748 he composed his best known poem, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, for which he received the trifling sum of fifteen guineas. In the following year, the tragedy of *Irene*, which he had brought up to London with him and which had so far gone the rounds of the theatres in vain, was produced by his old pupil, David Garrick, now the manager of Drury Lane.

The production could hardly be called successful. The play began amid cat-calls and whistling, and when the catastrophe was

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reached and the unfortunate heroine with the bowstring about her neck opened her lips for her dying speech, the audience broke into loud howls of "Murder! Murder!" and drove her silent from the stage. The friendly influence of Garrick, however, succeeded in keeping the stiff and lifeless play upon the stage for nine nights, and Johnson received the handsome profit of £300 or thereabouts, from what was, as a matter of fact, the least valuable of all his contributions to literature. The truth is that with all his talents Johnson utterly lacked dramatic power. His individuality was too strongly developed for him to put himself in another man's place. Goldsmith hit the nail on the head when he remarked to Johnson: "Why, sir, if you were to write a fable, you would make all the little fishes talk like whales." The author's great reputation induced some friends to read and even to speak well of the play; one, Pot, went so far as to say that it was the finest tragedy of modern times; which

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gem of criticism being reported to Johnson elicited the frank and crushing verdict, "If Pot says so, Pot lies."

From 1750 to 1752 Johnson was occupied with the composition of the *Rambler*, one of the countless eighteenth century imitations of the inimitable *Spectator*. The style shows Johnson almost at his worst, and his occasional attempts at pleasantry remind one painfully of the gambols of a hippopotamus. But its stately orthodoxy and its solemn moralizings on Johnson's favorite theme, the vanity of human wishes, exactly suited the taste of the age, and it is not too much to say that his contemporary reputation as the greatest of English moralists dated from the appearance of the *Rambler*.

The last number of this periodical had already been written when Johnson lost his wife. He was profoundly affected by her death; "remember me in your prayers," he wrote to an old friend in the first bitterness



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of his grief, "for vain is the help of man." And his sorrow was no transient emotion; to the end of his life he observed the day on which his Tetty died as a day of mourning and of solemn devotion to her memory. The prayers written down in his diary on these days wake, even at this distance of time, in the most careless reader that sense of fellowship in suffering which the old poet knew: *Sunt lacrimæ rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt.*

Mrs. Johnson's death would have left her husband alone in the world had he not already begun to gather about him a household of poor, distressed creatures — blind Miss Williams, old Mrs. Desmoulins and her daughter, Polly Carmichael, Dr. Levet, whose brutal manners put even Johnson to the blush, and the negro servant, Frank, whose office of valet must, from all we know of his master's dress and personal appearance, have been an absolute sinecure. Not one of these had any

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claim upon Johnson but that of wretchedness and poverty, yet he turned over his house to them, listened humbly to their quarrels and reproaches, and plunged himself into debt to meet their wants. He even went out himself to purchase fish and oysters for his favorite cat, Hodge, lest if he should assign this task to any of his dependents, the cat might be disliked as a source of trouble and mistreated in his absence. It was well said of the rough old man that he had nothing of the bear about him but his skin.

In 1756 Johnson began the famous edition of Shakespeare over which he dawdled for the next ten years. He received money from hundreds of subscribers for the projected work, spent it, and did nothing till stung to action by a contemporary satire which roundly charged him with dishonesty. It is rather the fashion nowadays to sneer at Johnson's criticisms of Shakespeare, but when the proper allowance is made for Johnson's time and

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temper, it is hard to find a saner piece of criticism in the English language than the preface to this edition, or more sensible advice than that which he gives there to the young student: "Notes are often necessary, but they are necessary evils. Let him that is yet unacquainted with the powers of Shakespeare, and who desires to feel the highest pleasure that the drama can give, read every play from the first scene to the last, with utter negligence of all his commentators. When his fancy is once on the wing, let it not stop at correction or explanation. When his attention is strongly engaged, let it disdain alike to turn aside to the name of Theobald and of Pope. Let him read on through brightness and obscurity, through integrity and corruption; let him preserve his comprehension of the dialogue and his interest in the fable. And when the pleasures of novelty have ceased, let him attempt exactness and read the commentators."

The *Idler*, a series of weekly essays, ap-

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peared in the *Universal Chronicle* for the years 1758-1760. We find in these essays the link which joins the stiff and somewhat pompous style of the *Rambler* to the more familiar and pleasing tone of the *Lives of the Poets*. In some of the papers, at least, we seem to hear Johnson talking as he might have talked at the club. The sketch of Dick Minim, the perfect type of a neo-classic critic, has several humorous touches of self-portraiture; and Johnson's open-mindedness is shown by his admitting a paper by his friend Langton, containing a kindly, but rather pointed, reproof of his own growing preference of projects to performances.

Johnson's mother died in the beginning of 1759. As usual he was in distress for money and had to borrow six guineas of a printer to make up a sum which he sent down to her in her illness. Unable to be with her in her last moments, he wrote her perhaps the most tender and touching letter which a son ever

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sent to his mother, and to provide for her funeral expenses and pay the little debts she left behind, he broke the spell which idleness was weaving around him and wrote in hot haste his story of *Rasselas*. This work has been absurdly criticised as a novel; as a matter of fact it is nothing of the kind. Johnson's Abyssinians make no pretence to reality; they are ideal creatures in an imaginary country, and the purpose of the book is neither to portray manners nor to delineate character, but to teach a moral lesson, and to denounce the favorite dogma of the day, that this is the best of all possible worlds. If there was one thing of which Johnson was firmly persuaded, it was that this dogma was a piece of cant, and cant was the object of his most vigorous denunciations. The note of the book is struck in the words of Imlac, the wise counselor of *Rasselas*: "Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed."

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In 1762 George III, who had newly come to the throne, was graciously pleased to grant Johnson a pension of £300 a year, one of the few public acts of His Majesty which were fortunate enough then and afterwards to meet with almost universal approbation. After some hesitation, not unnatural in the author of that definition of a pension already cited, Johnson accepted the favor. In youth he had been an ardent Jacobite, and it has even been conjectured, though probably without a shadow of truth, that he left London in 1745 to join Prince Charlie's invasion of England. But by 1762 the Jacobite cause was merely the shadow of a name; George III was, at least, a true-born Englishman, and Johnson's strong common sense naturally preferred so substantial a reality as three hundred a year to the empty pleasure of cursing the House of Hanover and drinking King James's health.

On the receipt of his pension, Johnson practically struck work. He had yet more

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than twenty years to live, but with the exception of the *Lives of the Poets*, a work which cost him little more time than was involved in the actual labor of composition, it is doubtful whether he devoted more than a few months of this period to the practice of literature. But if he wrote little he talked much. In the year after the receipt of his pension he joined the famous club which met for weekly suppers at the Turk's Head Inn. In the same year he first met Boswell. And here we may well leave him; the rest of his acts and his words, are they not written in the book of the prince of biographers?

The charm of Boswell's book lies in its lifelike presentation of Johnson's personality; from its pages the fascination which Johnson exercised over his contemporaries rises afresh to cast its spell over us. In what does the secret of the charm consist? Partly, no doubt, in the strong common sense of the man. We are all more or less victims to cant; in one

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form or another we all pay tribute to the organized hypocrisy of society. But none the less we love the man who rises superior to the conventions, exposes their hollowness, and laughs at the supposed necessity of their obligations. Again, the quick wit and bluff heartiness of Johnson are not without their share in his attraction. His wit was not always of the most refined. His passages at arms resemble cudgel play rather than a fencing match. But after all the quarter-staff is to us of the English-speaking race a kindlier weapon than the rapier. And Johnson was a past master in the noble art of giving hard knocks. "There is no arguing with Johnson," said one victim, rubbing, we may imagine, his broken head, "for if his pistol misses fire, he knocks you down with the butt." And if his bluntness was sometimes overpowering to his contemporaries, it is a source of unfailing amusement to a later generation. "He hugs



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you like a bear," said Burke, "and shakes laughter out of you."

But if this were all, Johnson would be merely a comic figure, a sort of literary Sancho Panza. The secret of his charm lies deeper; there is a trace in him of Don Quixote as well. Like that noble and most pathetic figure, Johnson was the champion of a failing order, of a cause already lost, although he knew it not. In literature, in politics, and in religion, Johnson stood on the brink of a revolution, and strove to save his world from plunging into what seemed to him a bottomless abyss. So great was his influence over the English world of his day that he actually succeeded in delaying the advent of that revolution. To avert it was beyond human power, but there is something irresistibly appealing in the sight of a brave man fighting a losing battle.

Finally, I think, the fascination of Johnson is due to that delight which human nature always experiences in discovering a treasure

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hidden beneath a repelling exterior. There is much about Johnson that is repellant — not merely the scarred face, the uncouth manners, and the slovenly dress, but the narrowness, the dogmatism, the arrogance, passing at times almost into brutality. But all this is on the surface, the hard crust through which we must break to reach the hidden ore. And the ore is rich in the noblest qualities of manhood — courage, courtesy, wisdom, and love.

“The  
Frugal Note of Gray”

THE fame of Gray is a unique phenomenon in English literature; assuredly it rests upon the narrowest of foundations. During his lifetime he condescended to publish exactly a dozen poems, and the barrenness of his productive powers may be measured by the fact that when to these poems there are added all that the diligence of successive editors has been able to collect, school exercises, fragments in English and Latin, trifling satiric skits, and rejected stanzas, the whole occupies something less than two hundred pages in the most elaborate edition of his works. This is but a petty harvest for a life of fifty years of unbroken leisure, and yet it is no paradox to say that the security

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of Gray's fame is in inverse proportion to the scantiness of his production. There is no poem in our language — not *Hamlet* nor *Paradise Lost* — which is surer of widespread and enduring popularity than *The Elegy in a Country Churchyard*. The time may perhaps come when Shakespeare and Milton will be as little understood or loved as they were in Gray's youth. But so long as the English language is spoken or read, Gray's masterpiece will continue to fill the place in the minds and hearts of men that it took upon its first appearance and has held since then for a century and a half. And this for the simple reason that there is no one poem in English, nor perhaps in any modern language, which is at once so universal in its appeal, so perfect and yet so simple in its form. And the immortality of the *Elegy* ensures, we may well believe, a like happy fate to the handful of lyrics which cluster round it.

The problem of Gray, if we may so call it,

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is to account for this discrepancy between the quantity and the quality of his work. There is, of course, no necessary connection between these two. Yet, as a matter of fact, in English literature, at least, the great poets have as a rule been prolific poets as well. And where the contrary has been the case the fact is generally capable of a very simple explanation; straitened circumstances, the pressure of other interests and duties, or early death, has limited or cut short the poet's work. But none of these explanations are available in the case of Gray.

Matthew Arnold in a famous essay has attempted what may be called the objective explanation. Gray, a born poet, he says, fell unhappily upon an age of prose; he was isolated in his century; the want of a genial atmosphere, the failure of sympathy in his contemporaries, prevented him from developing and flowering as he would have done in a happier time. “*He never spoke out.*” This

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little phrase, caught from a letter of a friend of Gray's and meaning, in truth, nothing more than that he had never told his friends how near his end was, becomes in Arnold's hands a magic formula by the frequent repetition of which he calls up a vision of Gray as an unfortunate being, gifted with all the qualities that go to make a poet, but blasted by the east wind of a barren and prosaic age. It need hardly be said that this vision is wholly the product of the critic's imagination. In the first place, prosaic as the mid-eighteenth century was, it had the wit to recognize the greatness of so rare and lofty a poet as Gray. The *Elegy* went through four editions in two months; the *Pindaric Odes* were received with a chorus of wondering applause which roused the bitter wrath of Samuel Johnson. Gray was the only true poet of his century who was honored by the offer of the laureateship. And even had it been otherwise he was not the man to be struck dumb by the in-

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difference of the public, for he was himself wholly indifferent to public praise or blame. His first and last poems alike appeared anonymously. He consented to the publication of the *Pindaric Odes* to please his friend, Walpole, and only permitted Dodsley to print the *Elegy* — and that without his name upon the title-page — because he learned that the manuscript had fallen into the hands of a pirate printer who was already setting it in type. He does not seem to have been especially elated by the popularity of the *Elegy*, and he laughed good-naturedly at the charge of obscurity which was at times brought against his odes. It would be hard, I think, to find another English poet who so serenely and sincerely disregarded contemporary opinion as Thomas Gray.

A later and less fanciful student of Gray's life and work, Professor Phelps, attributes the poet's limited production to three causes, his scholarly temper, his bad health, and his

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dignified reserve. This, it seems to me, is distinctly a more reasonable explanation, since it seeks the cause not in the character of the world surrounding the poet, but in the man himself. And yet I am inclined to doubt whether any of these causes, or all of them combined, satisfactorily account for Gray's sterility. The long disease of Pope's life did not check his creative power, nor did the dignified reserve of Tennyson's character prevent his becoming one of the most productive of English poets. The later years of Milton were marked by the presence of all of these supposed causes of poetic barrenness, yet these years gave birth to *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. The truth, I believe, lies somewhat deeper. Professor Phelps, like Matthew Arnold, assumes, perhaps too hastily, the presence in Gray of rich productive powers which were checked by certain temperamental and physical causes. But I am inclined to believe that



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Gray at once spoke the simple truth and told the whole story when he said to Walpole: “If I do not write much, it is because I cannot.” In other words he said little, because he had but little power of speech.

In his ingenious analysis of the character of Gray, Matthew Arnold has pointed out accurately enough his qualities of learning, penetration, seriousness, sentiment, and humor. But when the critic goes on to affirm that these qualities constitute the equipment and endowment for the office of poet, one declines to follow him. It would not be difficult, I fancy, to discover the presence of all these qualities in the character of Gray’s contemporary, Samuel Johnson. Yet, so far as I know, no one has yet discovered in the autocrat of the Literary Club a great poet blighted by an unfavorable environment or limited by scholarly habits and ill health.

The truth is that these qualities are mere accidents, by no means essential to the mak-

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ing of a poet. Shakespeare lacked learning, Wordsworth critical penetration, Chaucer high seriousness, Dryden sentiment, and Milton humor. The true essentials of a poet, though perhaps seldom found united and in their full power in a single individual, are profound reflection, vivid emotion, and far-reaching sympathy, combined with an irresistible tendency to expression and a mastery, inborn or acquired, of metrical form. Gray was, no doubt, a master of form. But he lacked almost entirely the born poet's creative impulse. It was not only that he dallied over his work — it took him three years to write the *Bard* — or laid it aside for other things as he laid aside the *Elegy* for seven years; but as his letters and journals show, he had abundance of sentiment, humor, and satire which he seldom or never felt the desire to express in verse.

Perhaps the most striking instance of this poetic reticence of Gray appears in his feel-

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ing for nature. It has been well said that Gray is the first English writer to exhibit that love of nature, particularly in her wilder and more solitary moods, which dominates so much of modern poetry. In his youth he was profoundly affected by his first sight of the Alps. He wrote to his friend West, for example: “In our little journey up to the Grande Chartreuse, I do not remember to have gone ten paces without an exclamation that there was no restraining. Not a precipice, not a torrent, not a cliff, but is pregnant with religion and poetry.” This is wholly in the manner of Wordsworth, but the creative poetic impulse moved Wordsworth to write *Tinturn Abbey*, whereas the only record of Gray’s feelings, apart from incidental references in letters, is found in a few Latin verses written in the album of the Grande Chartreuse. We must not be too severe upon Gray for his choice of a dead language; Latin verse was to him at that time, no doubt, an easier and

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more natural medium than English. But it is none the less remarkable that this should be his sole expression. Later in life he visited the Scottish Highlands, and discovered the English Lake Country, but by this time his tendency toward expression had become atrophied by long disuse. The *Journal in the Lakes* is delightful reading, but after all it is prose not poetry; and even the *Journal* would never have been written, had the friend for whom it was composed been able to fulfil his intention of accompanying Gray on the tour.

But even if Gray had been endowed with the impulse to expression, the question remains whether he did not lack other essential qualities of the great poet. A capacity for profound reflection Gray assuredly had not. His learning is undisputed; but learning acquired in Gray's fashion, merely to occupy the tedious hours of a life without purpose, learning that is never employed or put to any practical use, is apt to hinder rather than to help

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the habit of reflection. The observations on Aristotle, Froissart, and Shakespeare which Arnold cites as evidence of Gray's power to use his learning are excellent of their kind. But they are critical dicta and nothing more. And no one should have known better than Matthew Arnold the difference between the critical and the creative faculties. It is not by framing critical dicta, however sincere, acute, and well-turned they may be, that a scholar fits himself for the office of a poet. On the great problems of human life and destiny, Gray, if we may trust the double testimony of his letters and his poems, does not seem to have thought at all. His religious belief was sincere, but wholly conventional. He entertained a deep distrust of the destructive skepticism of Voltaire and Hume, but he cherished an almost equally profound dislike of the great contemporary champion of orthodoxy, Dr. Johnson. The former shocked his religious, the latter his æsthetic sensibilities.

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He lived on the verge of the great revolutionary movement which was to remodel the forms of society, government, and intellectual life in the Western world, without in the least realizing the impending deluge. He read the works of Rousseau, the great forerunner of that movement, "heavily, heavily," contrasting them, no doubt to their disadvantage, with the elegant romances of Crébillon and Marivaux. And if we would have a striking instance of the extent to which this absence of the capacity for profound reflection impairs the poetry of Gray, we have but to place his *Hymn to Adversity*, with all its pomp of poetic phraseology, beside that noblest of Wordsworth's odes which "assigns to the guardianship of duty or everlasting law the fragrance of the flowers on earth and the splendor of the stars in heaven." In form, and to a certain extent in diction also, Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty* is modelled upon Gray's *Hymn*. But what a difference in the content of these poems!

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Duty was the guiding star of Wordsworth's life; the reconciliation of the inevitable claims of duty with the natural human desire for happiness was the goal toward which his ethical thinking was directed. To Gray, on the other hand, Adversity was a mere abstraction, a literary lay figure on which to hang a rich, embroidered robe of verse. It is absurd to suppose that at the time when the *Hymn* was written, or indeed at any time in his quiet cloistered life, Gray had realized by experience the true meaning of the word. And as a natural result the thought of the *Hymn*, when severed from its form, is a mere series of commonplaces.

In dealing with Gray's capacity for emotion we are, I believe, on somewhat more uncertain ground. There is, indeed, little evidence of this capacity in his poems. If these were all that remained to testify of the character of Gray, we might believe him, as comparative strangers in his lifetime believed him, a man

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of cold, haughty, and fastidious temperament. But the known facts of his life contradict such a judgment. We know of Gray's devotion to his widowed mother, of his affection for his aunts,—always excepting one “old *Harridan*, the Spawn of Cerberus and the Dragon of Wantley,” — of his tender love for West, the friend of his youth, of his strong and long-continued friendship with Walpole, Mason, and Wharton, of the almost romantic warmth of his feeling for Norton Nichols and Bonstetten, the young friends whose intimacy lightened the gloom of his advancing years. It is hardly too much to say that Gray had a genius for friendship. Certainly those who penetrated behind the veil of his reserve and knew the man himself loved him as few English poets have been loved. And yet, when all is said, we must still believe that Gray's emotional life was at least as calm as it was deep. He had not the capacity for strong, lively, and passionate feeling that marks the



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poet of the first order. It seems plain that he never knew what it was to love a woman. Certainly his sedate flirtation with Miss Speed cannot be dignified with the name of love. It seems equally plain that he never hated any one with that fiery personal hatred that has so often spurred a poet on to give utterance to his feelings in words that still glow with the intense heat in which they were first conceived. Gray could neither love like Burns and Shelley, nor hate like Pope and Byron. Even where he felt deeply, as in his relations to his friends, he seems to have laid the ban of a gentle and dignified reserve upon any expression of his feelings. His gentle and kindly letters seldom or never betray the presence of any strong emotion. Only once in his life did the mingled passion of love and sorrow, of hopeless longing for the days that are no more, impel him irresistibly to utterance in verse. And the one poem that issued from this rare mood Gray carefully hid away among his papers

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where it was discovered only after his death. In the *Sonnet on the Death of West* we hear for the sole time in Gray's works the lyrical cry that marks the presence in the poet of intense and overmastering emotion:

“The fields to all their wonted tribute bear;  
To warm their little loves the birds complain;  
I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,  
And weep the more because I weep in vain.”

We may say of these lines what Gray's harshest critic has said of a famous passage in the *Elegy*: “Had Gray written often thus, it had been vain to blame and useless to praise him.”

But Gray did not write often thus. On the contrary, as he advanced in life he more and more resolutely denied himself the utterance of his feelings even in the privacy of conversation with his friends. Bonstetten complained that although he himself poured out his heart to the poet and made him the partner of his hopes, his desires, and his enthusiasms, Gray never returned the confidence. “His life was

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a sealed book to me; he never would talk of himself, never allow me to speak to him of his poetry. If I quoted lines of his to him, he kept silence like an obstinate child.” That Gray fully returned the warmth of Bonstetten’s affection we have abundant proof, and the poet seems himself to have realized and regretted the bar to the free communion of soul which his long habit of reserve and repression imposed upon him. “I know, and have too often felt,” he writes to his young friend, “the disadvantages I lay myself under, how much I hurt the little interest I have in you, by this air of sadness . . . but sure you will forgive though you cannot sympathize with me.” Gray’s capacity for the expression of his feelings in fact had by this time become as impossible in social intercourse as it had been long before in poetry. Gray was not an old man when he died, but his period of production had ceased with the completion of the *Bard* fourteen years before his death. And as

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regards the expression of personal feeling, it is not too much to say that his last utterance is contained in the closing stanzas of the *Elegy* written some seven years before the *Bard*. Neither that poem nor its companion piece, the *Progress of Poesy*, shows the slightest trace of the quality of emotion, which is generally considered essential to the true lyric. And since it is upon these poems that the fame of Gray as a lyric poet mainly depends, we seem to arrive at the perhaps startling conclusion that he was not in the true sense of the word a lyric poet. And certainly, unless in the category of the lyric a place can be found for the expression of lofty thought in stately language and harmonious rhythm, regardless of the quality of emotion, Gray's claims as a lyrist must be denied.

There is no need, I think, of elaborate argument to show the limited extent of Gray's sympathies. It has been generally admitted that his life of the cloister shut him off from

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all active interest in the affairs of men. It has not, however, been so generally recognized that this life was Gray's deliberate choice. At the age of twenty-six Gray had finished his education and had made the grand tour; he was his own master, in possession of a small but sufficient income, free from any embarrassment of family ties. The world was all before him where to choose, and he chose Cambridge, that “silly, dirty place” where he had spent four miserable years as an undergraduate. The intellectual life of the university was at its lowest ebb; over her ancient walls brooded the spirit of Laziness, “our sovereign lady and mistress, president of presidents and head of heads,” as Gray calls her in one of his humorous and futile outbursts of revolt against her power. Gray did not return to Cambridge to study for any profession, nor did he assume any share in the responsibilities and duties of academic life. It was not, indeed, until a few years before his death that

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he had any official connection with the university. He seems simply to have fled to Cambridge as to a refuge from a world in which he had few friends and no interests. It cannot, I think, be maintained that Gray gained anything by this flight from the world. Had he plunged like Johnson into the turmoil of London life, he would have emerged, perhaps a sadder, but certainly a wiser man. Had he lived on at Stoke Pogis in the society of his mother and his aunts, renewed his friendship with Walpole, cultivated the acquaintance of such neighbors as Lady Cobham and Miss Speed, and continued to work the vein of true poetry that had already disclosed itself in his mind, he would certainly have been a happier man. As it was, Gray's removal to Cambridge marks an abrupt check in his poetic production; he laid aside the half-completed *Elegy*, stammered out a few lines expressive of his loathing for the academic atmosphere in the fragmentary *Hymn*

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to *Ignorance*, and then relapsed into silence for five years, when he emerged just long enough to write the delightful ode on the death of Walpole's cat. From the composition of poetry Gray turned to those studies classical, archæological, and æsthetic which were henceforth to occupy so much of his life. They were fruitless studies, so far at least as any direct issue was concerned. No edition of a Greek classic, no treatise on Gothic architecture, no history of English poetry, ever came from Gray's pen. And in spite of the various plans for works of this sort that he formed and abandoned one after the other, we may well believe that he devoted himself to study not for the sake of producing anything, but with the hope of dispelling the ennui that hung so heavily about his first years at Cambridge, and, it may be, also of drugging his mind against too painful reflections on what might have been.

In time, however, Gray accommodated him-

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self fairly well to the unbroken monotony of this life. He removed from Peterhouse, where he had been disturbed by the rude pranks of "buckish" undergraduates, to the more congenial society of his old college, Pembroke. He adorned his rooms with old books, fresh flowers, and Japanese vases. He amused his leisure by thrumming on the harpsichord, wandered through the quiet fields about Cambridge, and noted with the eye and ear of a born lover of nature the blossoming of the first flowers and the song of the first returning birds. He indulged himself in vacation time with "Lilliputian journeys" about England, visiting with special delight the noble cathedrals whose Gothic architecture he was, perhaps, the first man of his age to appreciate at its true worth. And he wrote voluminously to the few friends in whose correspondence he found that social intercourse which the circumstances of his life and his own reticence of speech denied him at first hand. He even



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accepted a position as Professor of Modern History and Letters in the university. He delivered no lectures, to be sure, but none of his predecessors had done so since the chair was founded, and although his conscience troubled him at times for this compliance with academic etiquette, he never ventured to violate it. From beginning to end he remained consistent in his position as an onlooker rather than a participant in university life.

Nor was Gray less the onlooker at the world of public affairs. It is a mistake to think of his age as dull. It witnessed the last hopeless attempt to restore the Stuarts to their old throne, it saw the last struggle in England between representative institutions and the monarchy. Abroad it saw the foundation of the English empire in India, the final triumph of England over her old rival for the mastery of the New World, and the glorious battle of Frederick the Great single handed against the power of allied Europe. But for

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all these great events Gray had only the interest of the placid citizen who finds in the perusal of his daily paper a pleasant distraction from the monotony of his life. "We talk of war, famine, and pestilence," he writes, referring to himself and his Cambridge associates, "with no more apprehension than of a broken head, or of a coach overturned between York and Edinburgh." And Gray's interest in personalities was little stronger than his sympathy with great causes. He pitied the "poor King of Prussia," admired Pitt, and despised that "fizzling old owl," the Duke of Newcastle; but had Pitt betrayed his country or Frederick taken poison, Gray, one believes, would none the less have sat down calmly to his nice dinner and drunk his two glasses of sweet wine before expressing his feelings over such untoward events in a well-turned phrase of a letter to Mason or Wharton. Such, surely, is not the stuff of which great poets are made. It would be absurd, of course,

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to expect in a retired scholar like Gray the all-embracing human sympathy of Chaucer or of Shakespeare; but it is hard to refrain from comparing Gray's indifference with the love of liberty, the hatred of tyranny, the passion of patriotism which glowed in the hearts of Milton, Wordsworth, and Tennyson, poets by nature as little men of the world as Gray himself.

Such seem to me to be the causes which underlie and account for the scanty product of Gray's muse. Under the happiest of circumstances he might, perhaps, have somewhat increased the quantity of his verse. Under no imaginable circumstances, being what he was, could he have altered its quality. And what was he? When one subtracts from Gray those essentials to a great poet which he seems undoubtedly to have lacked, what remains? Enough, at least, to constitute him one of the finest artists in verse that glorify our literature. His diction is impeccable. By

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long and toilsome labor he wrought the fabric of his verse into something as near perfection as is permitted to mortals. It is not too much, I think, to say that in the rare and happy union of simplicity and beauty Gray's *Elegy* is unmatched in modern times. And his ear for rhythm was as fine as his sense of language was true. To match the lofty music of his odes with their interwoven harmonies, their pauses and prolongations, one must go back to Milton, or come down to Coleridge and Shelley. Finally Gray possessed what is perhaps a rarer gift than feeling for language or ear for rhythm, the constructive power. His poems are not compositions in which an occasional happy thought or striking image atones for much that is commonplace or superfluous. They are organic wholes. They spring up, run their destined course, and come to their proper close with something of that inevitable character that attends the phenomena of nature. Not a stanza, not a line, but has its

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function, its operant power, in the scheme of the whole. And this is due to the fact that Gray was not only a poet, but one of the severest of critics. What other poet in our history would have discarded from the *Elegy*, for the sole reason that it formed too long a parenthesis, such an exquisite quatrain as this:

“There scatter’d oft, the earliest of the year,  
By hands unseen are showers of violets found;  
The redbreast loves to build and warble there,  
And little footsteps lightly print the ground.”

This artistic merit of Gray’s work deserves, moreover, special recognition in view of the fact that the age in which he lived was wholly dominated by what may be called the mechanical theory of verse. Dryden, to borrow Lowell’s phrase, had “taught the trick of cadences that made the manufacture of verses more easy.” Pope brought this handicraft to its highest perfection; and Pope’s successors got the trick by heart. Regularity, uniformity, precision, and balance became, as Arnold has

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pointed out, the dominant characteristics of eighteenth century verse; and the prevailing form of that verse, the heroic couplet as written by Dryden and Pope, was exactly the form which gave fullest expression to these characteristics and denied expression to the higher and truer qualities of poetry. Gray, who began to write before the death of Pope and who died before the reaction against Pope's theory and practice was well under way, was exposed to the full force of this mechanical system. Yet he was practically unaffected by it. Two of his poems, indeed, *The Hymn to Ignorance* and the *Alliance of Education and Government*, may fairly be said to belong to the school of Pope. But both are fragments, thrown aside, probably, because Gray felt that his genius moved heavily in the harness of this school. And both these fragments can be subtracted from the scanty total of Gray's work without at all impairing the measure of his fame. Like the shepherd

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boy who refused the armor of the king, Gray won his victories by disregarding the accepted rules.

But Gray was something more than an artist in verse. He was a true, if not a great poet. He had what no other writer of his day, with the one exception of the ill-fated Collins, possessed, a real gift of song. In an age when the would-be poet turned as a matter of course to satire and didacticism, Gray shook out from time to time a lyric note as pure and sweet as that of a song bird. Such a note was not always at his command. He indulged too often in stately and sonorous rhetoric. The admired opening of the *Bard*, for example, is splendid declamation rather than song. But what other poet of his day could have thrown off such a couplet as that Gray made for Nichols while walking with him in the spring fields near Cambridge:

“There pipes the wood lark, and the song-  
thrush there  
Scatters his loose notes in the waste of air.”

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Or what other poet could so have caught the flute-like note of the young Milton as Gray did in the lines he puts into his great predecessor's mouth in the *Installation Ode*:

“Ye brown o’er-arching groves,  
That contemplation loves,  
Where willowy Camus lingers with delight!  
Oft at the blush of dawn  
I trod your level lawn,  
Oft woo’d the gleam of Cynthia silver-bright  
In cloisters dim, far from the haunts of Folly,  
With Freedom by my side, and soft-eyed  
Melancholy.”

Gray had, moreover, the true poet's quick sensitiveness to the appeal of romantic landscape, literature, and tradition. Classical in his expression, he became more and more, as he advanced in life, romantic in his taste. Here, too, he was at variance with the spirit of his age. To style a scene, a sentiment, or a story romantic was in the eyes of the censors of his day to condemn it as wild, extravagant, or improbable. But Gray set his *Bard* among the savage mountains of Wales, paraphrased



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stirring battle-pieces by the Celtic bards, and introduced his astonished countrymen to the grim mythology of Scandinavia. It is hard to believe that we are listening to a writer of the mid-eighteenth century when we read the ringing lines that tell how the Fatal Sisters plied their ghastly loom, or how Odin rode down the yawning steep to wake the witch-wife in her grave:

“Facing to the northern clime,  
Thrice he traced the runic rhyme;  
Thrice pronounced, in accents dread,  
The thrilling verse that wakes the dead;  
Till from out the hollow ground  
Slowly breath’d a sullen sound.”

Would not one say that we were listening to the voice of Sir Walter? But the mere truth is that Gray broke the way not only for Scott, but for all who since his day have turned with delight to the wild, enchanted fields of northern myth and saga.

Finally, the truest poetic quality in Gray is his gift of tender, quiet pathos. The gentle

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melancholy that overhung his life, deepening at times into profound depression, and but rarely lifting to let his native graceful humor shine through the clouds, interpenetrates the greater part of his verse and finds its supreme expression in the *Elegy*. There is nothing poignant, little that is personal, in Gray's pathos. We know that the *Elegy* had its origin in a mood of melancholy brooding due to Gray's loss of a relative, and found its long-deferred completion during a similar mood due to a like cause. Yet it is singularly abstract and general in tone. Not once in all its calm and gentle progress do we catch the cry of personal lament. That cry, as I have pointed out, occurs once, and once only, in Gray. There is nothing here of the stormy wrath of *Lycidas*, of the lofty aspiration of *Adonais*, of the alternations of hope and doubt that pass like April cloud and sunshine over *In Memoriam*. Yet who would wish the *Elegy* other than it is? What it lacks in thrill of in-

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dividual passion it gains in breath and universality of emotion. As the poet muses over the unknown and nameless dead, it is not so much the voice of Gray that we hear as "the still, sad music of humanity." And this music, like that which Wordsworth heard in later days, is

"Not harsh, nor grating, though of ample  
power  
To chasten and subdue."

It is one of the fashions of contemporary criticism to inquire somewhat curiously into the mission and the message of a poet. I am by no means sure that this quest is always successful. Too often, I think, the critic reads out of the poet only what he has first read into him. Gray, we know, wrote to please himself, with little care for his effect upon the world. But the unconscious teacher is often the best, and if for once we should indulge in this modern fashion, might it not be true to say that Gray's mission was to teach the

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dignity and beauty of poetry as an art, and that his message was to touch an age singularly hard and coarse with a sense of the pathos of human destiny. And might one not go further and find in Gray a special lesson for an age so loud, so troubled, and so rebellious as our own, the lesson of gentleness and resignation. One stanza, excised from the *Elegy* by too severe a hand, seems to me to sum up this lesson in Gray's own perfect way:

“Hark! how the sacred calm, that broods  
    around,  
Bids every fierce, tumultuous passion cease,  
In still, small accents whisp’ring from the  
    ground  
A grateful earnest of eternal peace.”

## The Charm of Goldsmith

TO be the best-beloved of English writers, what a title is that for a man" — so Thackeray opens his delightful lecture on Oliver Goldsmith in the *English Humourists*. And this title Goldsmith has borne almost without a rival from the day of his death. While he lived, men too generally underestimated him, rascals cheated him, blackguards slandered him; his very friends alternately ridiculed and reproved him. Yet even then he was loved, loved in spite of his follies and frailties, by all who had themselves the heart to recognize the warm, generous, human heart that beat beneath the ugly and ridiculous exterior of the little Irish doctor. At the news of his death Burke burst into tears, and Reynolds laid aside

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his brush and closed his studio — which he had never done before even in times of deep domestic affliction. But perhaps the most touching tribute to his memory was the outburst of lament from the poor women who crowded the staircase to his chambers; wretched outcasts, waiting there to hear the last of the kind gentleman who had never insulted their misery and who had often emptied his slender purse to relieve their wants.

“Let not his frailties be remembered,” wrote Johnson of Goldsmith, some months after his death. “He was a very great man.” Yet to-day it is not so much Goldsmith’s greatness as his delightfulness that fills the mind of the reader who turns once more the well-worn pages of the *Vicar of Wakefield*, the *Deserted Village*, or *She Stoops to Conquer*. And so little can we obey the great moralist’s injunction to forget poor Goldsmith’s frailties that we are perhaps almost too prone to dwell upon them. Goldsmith’s faults were never such as

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to startle or repel. In his lifetime they wronged none but himself. And since his death it would seem that they have atoned for the injury they did by winning for him the hearts of all who desire to feel between themselves and the great men of the past the bond of a common humanity.

Nowhere, I think, is this bond more readily perceptible than in the case of Goldsmith. As we read the story of his life, we feel that in all but genius he is one of us. We first pity, and then love him.

Goldsmith's life falls into three uneven parts: the period of youth and merry idleness, the period of obscure poverty and drudgery, and the period, all too brief, of literary and social distinction. He was born in 1728, in a "tumble-down, fairy-haunted farm-house," near the little Irish village of Pallas. His father, Charles Goldsmith belonged to an English family who had been long enough resident in Ireland to acquire many of the characteristics

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of the native Irish, especially their gaiety, sunny temper, credulity, and careless disregard of the hard facts of life. He himself had made an improvident marriage and at the time of Oliver's birth was a country parson, eking out his forty pounds a year by farming. Shortly afterwards he was transferred to a parish worth two hundred pounds per annum, in which he regarded himself as so passing rich that he "wound up" his brood of children — Oliver was one of ten — "to be mere machines of pity," and "perfectly instructed them in the art of giving away thousands before they were taught the more necessary qualifications for earning a farthing." These are Goldsmith's own words, taken from one of the many autobiographical passages in his works, and they show what, perhaps, we might have guessed without them, that the art of profuse expense and somewhat thoughtless charity in which he was so great a master was no mere individual characteristic but an inherited and early-developed family trait.



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As a child Goldsmith is said to have been stupid, sensitive, hot-tempered, and loving. His growth was checked and his features deeply scarred by an attack of small-pox. He passed through several schools with no particular credit, and at the age of seventeen was induced, much against his will, to enter the University of Dublin.

Goldsmith's reluctance was not due to a dislike of learning, but to his keen perception of the humiliating terms upon which it was now offered him. His father's income had been so reduced by the effort to provide a dowry for the eldest daughter of the family, who had secretly married a gentleman above her in rank and wealth, that he could not afford to send Oliver to college, except as a sizar. Now a sizar in those days was little better than a menial. He swept courts, carried dishes, dined on fragments, and acquired what learning he could in the intervals. In Gold-

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smith's words, he was "at once studying freedom and practising servitude."

At college Goldsmith passed four undistinguished years. It is plain that he was, and felt himself, wholly out of place within the academic walls. Once indeed by a burst of energy he gained a petty prize worth thirty shillings, and it is eminently characteristic of the man at all times of his life that he promptly spent the money in an entertainment with music and dancing in his attic room. His tutor heard the sound of revelry, burst open the door, knocked Goldsmith down, and drove the dancers headlong before him down the stairs. Poor Goldsmith promptly ran away from college, starved for a time in the streets of Dublin, and then set out to tramp across the country with some vague idea of taking ship for America. He was rescued by his brother, who brought him back to college and patched up some sort of a truce with the redoubtable tutor. It is pleasant to learn that this hard-

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hitting personage finally came to a disgraceful end.

A couple of anecdotes are preserved that show us something of the better side of Goldsmith at this time. He used, we are told, to write street-ballads and sell them at five shillings apiece to eke out his miserable allowance. At night he would steal out to hear them sung and peddled off in the Dublin alleys. It was under such circumstances that the future author of the *Deserted Village* made his first acquaintance with "sweet poetry":

"Thou source of all my bliss and all my woe,  
That found'st me poor at first, and keep'st  
me so."

Yet poor as he was, Goldsmith was always ready to give away all he had to wretches poorer than himself. A friend who came to call on him one morning had to haul him by main force out of the ticking of his mattress. Goldsmith had given the blankets off his bed the night before to a poor woman with five children,

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whom he found crying at the college gates, and to keep warm had burrowed so deeply into his mattress that he could not get out again without help. The story is ludicrous or pathetic, as one chooses to look at it. Certainly, it could not be told of any man of his day but Oliver Goldsmith.

After leaving college Goldsmith passed three happy, idle years with his family. He ran errands for his mother, made love to a pretty cousin, played on the flute, and sang songs at the village tavern. In vain did his relatives attempt to get him started in life. They induced him to apply for sacred orders, — imagination boggles at Goldsmith in the pulpit, — but he was rejected by the bishop on the ground, we are told, that he applied for ordination in a pair of most unreverend scarlet breeches. They collected thirty guineas and started him for America to seek his fortune. He came back in six weeks with nothing in his pocket, and with an amazing tale of the heartless sea-captain who had

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stripped him of his money and left him stranded at Cork. The letter which he wrote on this occasion to appease his mother's not unnatural wrath is, I believe, the earliest specimen of his composition now extant, and it is as delightful as a chapter of the *Vicar of Wakefield*, and, possibly, bears about the same relation to what actually occurred as that prose idyl does to real life. Once more he was launched, this time with London as his goal; but he got no farther than Dublin, when he fell into the hands of a gambler who promptly eased him of the fifty pounds which, we may suppose, were already beginning to burn his pocket. With one last despairing effort, his family raised a final purse, shipped him off to Edinburgh to study medicine, and washed their hands of him. He never returned to Ireland, though many a time his heart yearned for his old home, and he never saw any of his kinsfolk again, except once or twice when a brother, as poor, as restless, and as simple as Oliver himself, sought

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him out in his London garret to obtain his aid in making a fortune.

In Edinburgh, Goldsmith stayed two years, making a pretence, at least, of study, telling Irish stories in the students' clubs, and spending a disproportionate share of his small allowance on rich sky-blue satin and superfine claret-colored clothes. From Edinburgh he set out for Leyden, ostensibly to listen to the lectures of the learned Albinus and the not less learned Gaubius. But a year's intercourse with these worthies sated his thirst for academic knowledge; he borrowed a small sum from a fellow-countryman, spent the greater part of it in the purchase of rare tulip bulbs for an uncle in Ireland, and set out on his travels with one guinea in his pocket, one shirt to his back, and his beloved flute in his hand, a happy, philosophic vagabond.

The year of travel that ensued was probably the most important event in Goldsmith's life. It widened his horizon, stored his memory with

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scenes and images, and furnished materials for some of his best work. He has left us a picturesque account of it in the story of George Primrose's wanderings, and although this can hardly be taken as a scrupulously exact piece of autobiography, we know from other sources that it contains at least the main incidents of Goldsmith's tour. He traveled on foot, earned a night's rest and a breakfast by playing on his flute, begged a dinner at the door of some convent, earned a few shillings occasionally by disputing at some university, and borrowed from every one who would lend to him, until, as he frankly confessed, there was hardly a kingdom in Europe in which he was not a debtor. He passed through Belgium, France, and Switzerland, visited Italy and Germany, and in the winter of 1756 returned to England, "his whole stock of cash amounting to a few half-pence." His *wanderjahre* were over, and a period of hard work and grinding poverty was now to begin.

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Goldsmith was at this time, as he says in a letter, "without friends, recommendations, money, or impudence, and that in a country where being born an Irishman was sufficient to keep me unemployed. Many in such circumstances would have had recourse to the friar's cord or the suicide's halter. But with all my follies I had principle to resist the one, and resolution to combat the other."

In truth, Goldsmith was no longer the merry, lazy boy of earlier days; nor did he longer expect to live indefinitely upon the bounty of his relatives. On the contrary, he now set in desperately, one might almost say heroically, to earn a living for himself. But this was no easy matter. He seems to have worked his way up to London by joining a troupe of strolling players, but his first associates in the capital were the beggars of Axe Lane. He found employment as a chemist's clerk, rose to be a feeless doctor in the slums, acted as press corrector to the printer and novelist, Richardson, served



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for a time as usher at a boys' school, and finally hired himself out as hack-writer to a publisher named Griffiths. Of all his occupations, school-teaching seems to have been the one he hated most. "I have been an usher at a boarding-school," says a character in the *Vicar*, speaking no doubt the sentiments of Oliver Goldsmith, "and may I die by an anodyne necklace (*i. e.*, a halter), but I had rather be an under turnkey in Newgate. I was up early and late; I was browbeat by the master, hated for my ugly face by the mistress, worried by the boys within, and never permitted to stir out to meet civility abroad."

But Goldsmith's first experiences in the literary profession can hardly have been pleasanter than school-teaching. He lodged and boarded at the house of Griffiths, who complained of his idleness because he did not write every day, and all day, who altered his articles, and refused him sufficient food. In despair Goldsmith sought for an appointment as a

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doctor in the service of the East India Company, and to obtain the necessary outfit composed his well-known *Enquiry into the State of Polite Learning in Europe*. The title, by the way, is a misnomer; the subject it indicates was quite beyond Goldsmith's capacity, but, on the other hand, the little book gives a very vivid picture of the degraded condition of the profession of literature in England, a subject on which no man was perhaps better qualified to speak. The East India scheme, however, fell through, and as a last attempt to escape from the slavery of hack-writing, he applied for a position as hospital mate, and was rejected at the preliminary examination. It was at this time that Goldsmith touched the lowest point of misery; he pawned his clothes to pay his landlady, pledged some books sent him for review to secure a meal, was threatened with the jail by the angry bookseller, and positively entreated as a favor that he might be sent there. The quarrel was patched up, how-

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ever, and the success of his *Enquiry* which appeared about this time tended somewhat to improve his prospects in the dreary world of which he had now become a citizen.

Goldsmith was at last fairly launched upon the sea of letters. He found other and more generous employers than Griffiths, published a charming group of essays, *The Bee*, and a most entertaining series of letters purporting to be written by a Chinese philosopher in England to his friends in the Middle Kingdom. He wrote a life of Beau Nash, a child's history of England, and contributed essays, reviews, and biographical sketches to the magazines of the day. Little by little as he rose in the world he made the acquaintance of distinguished men of letters. Percy called at his lodgings, in "a wretched, dirty room," at the head of Break-neck Stairs. He entertained Johnson at a dinner in the politer quarters in Wine-office Court, to which he soon removed. Percy, who escorted the great Cham thither,

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was surprised to find him in a new suit, a new wig nicely powdered, and everything about him so perfectly dissimilar from his usual habits and appearance that he was moved to ask the cause. "Why, sir," said Johnson, "I hear that Goldsmith, who is a very great sloven, justifies his disregard of cleanliness and decency by quoting my practice; and I am desirous this night to show him a better example." No record remains of the dinner and the good things that were said over it, but from that night on Johnson was one of Goldsmith's closest friends. The great dictator of letters took the struggling author to his heart, bargained for him with the booksellers, bullied theatrical managers to get his plays produced, touched up his poems, and at his death wrote an epitaph in his most magnificent Latin for his monument in Westminster Abbey, scorning, as he said, to disgrace its walls by an English inscription.

In 1763 Goldsmith was enrolled as a charter

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member of the famous club over which Johnson ruled so long. At the close of the following year he published his first signed work, *The Traveller*, and it is from this time that his contemporary reputation as a man of letters may be said to date. When he joined the club certain members were disposed to look down upon him as a mere literary hack, unworthy of the honor of their society, but on the appearance of the *Traveller*, Johnson's pronouncement that the poem was superior to anything since the death of Pope established his position. It is characteristic of Goldsmith that this poem, his first bold plea for fame, was dedicated, not to his literary protector, nor to some noble lord who might have rewarded him with a handful of guineas, but to his brother Henry, "a man who, despising fame and fortune, has retired early to happiness and obscurity, with an income of forty pounds a year."

With the publication of the *Traveller*, Goldsmith entered upon his last period, and from

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this time on he produced an uninterrupted series of classics. Emboldened by the success of the *Traveller*, the publishers ventured to print a novel of Goldsmith's which had been lying in their hands for at least three years. This was none other than the immortal *Vicar of Wakefield*. All the world knows the story of the way the book came into the publishers' hands, of Goldsmith's arrest by an irate landlady, of Johnson's intervention, of the novel "ready for the press," which Johnson took out and sold for sixty pounds, and of the scolding Goldsmith gave his landlady for having used him so ill. A recent discovery has shown that this must have happened soon after Goldsmith had made Johnson's acquaintance, and, moreover, that the book was by no means "ready for the press." Probably, indeed, the long delay in publication was due not only to the hesitation of the publishers, but to Goldsmith's tardiness in completing a work for which he had already received, and spent, the money. Of

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one thing, at least, we may be sure: Goldsmith, if left to himself, would never have sold the *Vicar* to pay a landlady's bill. It was work of another sort than this that he earned his bread and butter by. And it may well be that the hasty and unsatisfactory conclusion of the novel is due, in part, to its having been so unceremoniously taken out of his hands.

Of the book itself, little need be said. It is one of the undisputed classics of the English language, one of the few English classics whose merit has been as fully and continuously recognized upon the continent as in English-speaking lands. Its defects are obvious. They were obvious even to the author: "there are a hundred faults in this thing," says Goldsmith in the preface, "and a hundred things might be said to prove them beauties. But it is needless." Quite needless. The book lives and will live, not by its plot, or its characters, but by what Henry James has called the "amenity" of its author, "the frankness of his sweetness

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and the beautiful ease of his speech.” “There was,” says the critic, “scarce a difficulty, a disappointment, an humiliation, or a bitterness of which he had not intimate and repeated knowledge; and yet the heavy heart that went through all this overflows in the little book as optimism of the purest water — as good humor, as good taste, and as drollery.”

The *Vicar* was followed in 1768 by Goldsmith's first play, *The Good-natured Man*. Although it ran for ten nights and brought Goldsmith a decent sum of money, the lively comedy by no means obtained the success it deserved. It ran counter to the prevailing taste of the time for the sentimental and lachrymose drama; elegant judges found its language “uncommonly low”; in fact, it seems only to have escaped being damned on the first night by the comic humor of one of the actors. Goldsmith was bitterly mortified. At a meeting of the club, after the play, he managed, indeed, to conceal his feelings, laughed, chatted, and sang



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his favorite song; but "all the time," he said, "I was suffering horrid tortures, and when all were gone but Johnson, I burst out a-crying, and even swore by——that I would never write again." "All which, Doctor," said Johnson, amazed at the frankness with which Goldsmith a few weeks afterward related this scene in a company of comparative strangers, "I thought had been a secret between you and me; and I am sure I would not have said anything about it for the world." Of course he would not; but a man may be allowed to laugh at his own tears, though not at those of others; and we love Goldsmith for his tears and laughter quite as much as we honor Johnson for his goodness and self-control.

Two years after the failure of his comedy Goldsmith achieved an undisputed success by the publication of the *Deserted Village*. Of this poem less need be said, perhaps, than even of the *Vicar of Wakefield*. Its place among the classics of our language, ratified by the ap-

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plause and tears of generations of readers, is absolutely secure. What signifies pointing out, as certain critics of the baser sort have done, that its economic theories are crude and its pictures of rural life unreal? It is not the business of a poem to teach political economy or to correspond with minute accuracy to everyday existence. Its business is to charm the mind and touch the heart, and the *Deserted Village* does both. It is not only the limpid purity of its diction, the easy flow of its rhythm, and the old-world grace of its portraits that have made the poem immortal; but even more its revelation of the poet, of his wistful affection for the friends of his youth, of his tender sympathy for the misery he saw about him. Gentleness, goodness, and humanity breathe from every line.

Goldsmith completed his cycle of classics by producing in 1773 one of the happiest comedies of our language, *She Stoops to Conquer*. Founded upon an incident of his own school

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days the story of the play is purely farcical; but the wit of the dialogue and the humor of the characters raise it to the highest plane of comedy. It is one of the few plays of its century that keep the stage to-day, and it is hard to anticipate a time when the rollicking fun of Tony Lumpkin and the mischievous grace of Kate Hardcastle will lose their hold upon spectators.

And yet it was with the greatest difficulty that this most delightful of plays found its way upon the boards. The manuscript lay for months in the hands of a manager, while Goldsmith was fretting his heart out with impatience and struggling against a heavy burden of debt; and it was at last only by the forceful intervention of Johnson that the manager was induced to accept it. He did so, however, with the full conviction that it was foredoomed to failure; he refused to adorn it with a new scene or a new dress, and he communicated his doubts to the actors who one by one threw up their

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parts. But when at last all obstacles were overcome and the play appeared, its success was instant and overwhelming. The club attended the first night in a body to beat down the anticipated opposition, but the enemies of Goldsmith did not dare to show their heads. As Horace Walpole writes: "All eyes were upon Johnson, who sat in a front row in a side box, and when he laughed everybody thought himself warranted to roar."

The peals of laughter which greeted the appearance of *She Stoops to Conquer*, and proclaimed Goldsmith's final triumph over prejudice and false taste, marked also the close of his career. He died about a year afterwards of a fever brought on by overwork and trouble of mind, leaving a few short poems and the brilliant fragment, *Retaliation*, to be published after his death. He was laid to rest in the burial ground of the Temple Church; his books and furniture were sold to pay his debts.

It must not be thought that, during this last

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period when Goldsmith was producing his best work, he had risen above the necessity of writing for his daily bread. With the exception of his two plays he hardly made enough by his masterpieces to buy butter for his bread. The *Traveller* brought him twenty guineas, the *Vicar* sixty pounds, the *Deserted Village*, we are told, one hundred pounds. He would indeed have been glad to devote himself wholly to work of this sort, but no way ever opened for him. His friends at one time applied for a pension such as had been granted Johnson, but it was promptly refused by the government, probably because Goldsmith had declined to hire out his pen in their service against the party of his friend, Burke. The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland once offered his patronage, but Goldsmith begged him to transfer it to his brother Henry. And so he struggled on, collecting anthologies, compiling histories of Greece and Rome, abridging his own compilations, turning out lives of Parnell and Bolingbroke, and

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finishing the very month before his death an eight-volume work on *Animated Nature*. Hard task-work, but not without intervals of innocent amusement. When Goldsmith had written himself to a standstill, he used to indulge in one of the vacations which he called "a Shoemaker's Holiday." Three or four friends would meet for breakfast in his rooms, stroll out along the city road and through the fields to a country inn, where they dined at ten-pence a head, play skittles in the afternoon, and return, as evening fell, for supper in a London coffee-house. The whole expense of the excursion, we are told, never exceeded a crown, and oftener was from three to four shillings, "for which the party obtained good air and exercise, good living, the example of simple manners and good conversation."

In the face of such a simple record as this, handed down to us by a contemporary who had often been Goldsmith's fellow in a Shoemaker's Holiday, it is a little hard to believe

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the stories of the poet's vanity, profusion, sensuality, and passion for gambling which are bandied about from one biographer to another. Yet it is probable that these tales have a certain foundation of truth. Goldsmith had to the last the heart of a child. He was childishly eager to attract attention, to shine, to please. He decked his little body in the most gorgeous raiment and left a large tailor's bill unpaid behind him. He entertained sumptuously at his rooms, not to gratify his own appetite, for he is described as drinking hot milk at these banquets, but to give pleasure to his friends. From one vice, at least, common enough in his age, Goldsmith always seems to have been free; he was not a drinking man. It is not so easy to acquit him of the charge of gambling. There is a good deal of contemporary testimony to show that he was fond of play, and quite as much to show that he always lost. He had a child's love of excitement, a child's firm conviction that he would finally

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win, and a child's incapacity to match older and craftier players. There is a most amusing picture in his rhymed letter to Mrs. Bunbury of the way in which she and her sister, the Jessamy Bride, lured him on with mocking advice to lose his shillings at loo. But there is another story, not so well known as it might be, which shows how little Goldsmith had of the true gambler's absorbing passion. He was playing whist one night with a party of friends, for money of course, as every one played at that time. At a critical moment of the game, when the rubber depended upon a single point, Goldsmith suddenly threw down his hand and dashed out of the house into the street. "Where the deuce have you been?" said one of the players on his return. "I'll tell you," he replied. "As I was pondering over my cards, my attention was attracted by the voice of a woman in the street, who was singing and sobbing at the same time; so I flew down to relieve her distress, for I could not be



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quiet myself till I had quieted her.” We can hardly imagine Charles Fox, Lord March, or any other of the famous gamblers of the day, quitting the table to relieve the sorrows of a poor street-singer.

Of envy, the basest vice, with which Goldsmith has been charged, we may unhesitatingly pronounce him free. He was vain, no doubt, and his vanity was often hurt by the way in which men whom he rightly believed to be inferior to himself, Beattie, for example, and Kelley, were pensioned and applauded, while he was neglected. And with a child's lack of self-control, he uttered his feelings when wiser men would have been silent. Often, too, his supposed outbursts of envy were whimsical extravagances misunderstood by the solemn fools to whom they were addressed. Who can believe, for instance, that he was actually envious when he said to Boswell, expatiating on the greatness of their common friend: “Do not talk of Johnson in such terms; it harrows

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up my very soul." The fact is that Goldsmith was a simple man in a somewhat sophisticated society, and its members mistook his occasional petulance for malice, and his jests for bitter earnest. Even Johnson seems in this point to have misunderstood him.

But we may comfort ourselves with a remark of Johnson's, made shortly after Goldsmith's death, when a roomful of people at Sir Joshua's were depreciating their dead friend's work. The loyal old man rose to his feet, looked the chatterers in the face, and exclaimed, "If nobody was suffered to abuse poor Goldy but those who could write as well, he would have few censors!" And to sum up the whole matter, Goldsmith wrote so well because he was at bottom so good. If he had the faults of a child, he had as well a child's virtues. He loved children because, as has been said, he was always at heart a child. He was unsuspecting, generous, and confiding; tender-hearted and easily moved to pity. If

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he ever took offence, as he was often warranted in doing, he was always ready to forgive. Above all he had that simple faith in goodness, human and divine, which our Lord himself recognized as not the least of virtues when he set a little child in the midst of the wrangling disciples. And it is this childlikeness, if I may use the word, appearing as it does both in his life and in his work, that constitutes for all who know him the peculiar charm of Oliver Goldsmith.

## The Last Minstrel

SCOTT was in his time the most popular of all the great poets of the Romantic movement, and he remains to-day the best loved of their number. Whatever may be the received opinion as to the merit of his verse when compared with that of his contemporaries, it is impossible to feel for the cold austerity of Wordsworth, the passionate egoism of Byron, or even the sensitive ideality of Shelley, anything like that sentiment of warm personal affection which we cherish for the kindly, generous, and broadly human personality of Scott. In part, no doubt, this sentiment is due to the unbounded reverence of boyhood for the wonder-working poet who unbarred the gates and led the way into the enchanted garden of romance. Nine out of every ten readers of English verse may, I fancy, repeat with all sincerity

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and truth the closing words of Lang's letter to Sir Walter: "From you first, as we followed the deer with King James, or rode with William of Deloraine on his midnight errand, did we learn what Poetry means and all the happiness that is in the gift of song. This and more than may be told you gave us, that are not forgetful, not ungrateful, though our praise be unequal to our gratitude."

But there is something more in our feeling for Scott and his work than a mere lingering of the ingenuous and uncritical admiration of boyhood. There comes a time, indeed, in most lives when Scott's poems are thrown aside for the work of other poets, graver or more sensuous, subtler or more passionate. At such a period, too, his novels suffer under the onslaughts of the newly awakened critical sense; one is apt to pronounce them stilted in diction, clumsy in machinery, and generally wanting in technic. But this period passes, like other literary maladies, and we come back

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to Scott with a renewed delight in that brave spirit of adventure which bewitched our youth, and with a truer appreciation of the lyric beauty, the power of sustained narrative, the vigorous and varied gift of character portrayal which combine with his epic simplicity and his romantic charm to insure him a permanent place, not in his native language only, but among the great names of the literature of the world.

It is probable that Scott's popularity rests to-day, with the generality of readers, rather upon his novels than his verse. This is due in part to the almost unchallenged pre-eminence which fiction since Scott's day has obtained over other forms of literature, and to the present almost unbroken preoccupation of the general reader with novels, and novels only. And it is due in part also to the undisputed fact that many of the best characteristics of Scott — his shrewd and sunny humor, his genial sympathy with all sorts of men, and

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his firm grasp on the realities of life — are revealed more clearly in his novels than in his poetry. Yet it is no less true that the neglect which his verse suffered during the greater part of the last century was undeserved. His fame was eclipsed by the successive ascensions of Byron, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning. Each of these poets became famous, and rightly famous, for qualities and effects not to be found in Scott, and as a consequence Scott's verse was underrated because it lacked these qualities and effects. A saner and more sympathetic criticism estimates a poet by what he is and does, not by what he could not be and never dreamed of doing. Toward the close of the Victorian era poetry tended more and more to become a thing of the study, and the appreciation of poetry to become less popular in the true sense of the word, and more narrowly limited to a small, refined, and art-loving class, in whose eyes the open-air, impetuous, and often careless verse of Scott was an unpardon-

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able crime against the canons of true art. The world-wide vogue of Kipling's verses in the last decade, however, would seem to indicate that a strong reaction against the later Victorian standards has already set in, and it is by no means improbable that as the critics come to realize that the last word of poetry was not spoken by Tennyson, Rossetti, or Swinburne, they may also come to recognize more generally the widely diverse merits of the great predecessor of these poets.

The truth is that Scott, although his poetic activity falls almost wholly within the nineteenth century, was absolutely unmoved by the great currents of feeling which swayed that age. His attitude toward the principles that precipitated the gigantic convulsion of the Revolution in France and brought about the bloodless, but no less important, reform of the English constitution was from first to last that of the fighting Tory. In his fiery youth he headed a band of gentlemen who



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cracked the heads of Irish Jacobins in the pit of the Edinburgh theater; in his decrepit old age he sprang from his carriage to arrest a radical rowdy at the Selkirk hustings. His political ideas were summed up in the old Cavalier motto: "Fear God; honor the king." His attitude toward George IV, over which Thackeray makes merry, was not that of a servile courtier to his sovereign, but that of a Highland bard toward the chief of his clan. Scott was the last English poet to whom the sentiment of loyalty in its old accepted meaning was something more than an idle phrase. He was in fact the last minstrel, and his muse

"——the Lady of the Mere  
Sole-sitting by the shores of old romance."

Scott represents the culmination of the eighteenth century's interest in the romantic and medieval past. In him the tendencies that had budded in Horace Walpole and Bishop Percy and "Ossian" McPherson broke out into full and

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perfect flower. Our knowledge of the Middle Ages is to-day in many respects more accurate and well-rounded; our poets and novelists would shudder at such light-hearted anachronisms as those in which Scott leaps over the centuries to make his wizard clansman contemporary with Queen Mary's moss-troopers, or to send a Danish viking campaigning like a Crusader "on Carmel's cliffs and Jordan's strand." And yet with all our increase of knowledge and painstaking accuracy of expression it is doubtful whether any poet since Scott's day has ever penned a passage so instinct with medievalism as the well-known description of Branksome at the opening of the *Lay* or the scarcely less famous Mass in Melrose Abbey at its close. Here as nowhere else in modern English literature the romantic past is seized and realized in two of its most dominating features, warfare and religious devotion.

Of a third great element in medievalism, romantic love, Scott is said to have had a

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fainter perception; and it is clear that the passion of love plays but a small part in his verse. And yet I doubt whether any later poet has reproduced more accurately the attitude of the medieval minstrel toward love both in its lighter and graver aspects as Scott in one of the least regarded of his poems, *The Bridal of Triermain*. It would be an interesting study to compare the Arthur of that poem, the chivalrie, adventurous, and amorous king of the old romances, with the spiritualized and allegorized Arthur of the *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson's may be the nobler conception, but there can be no doubt that Scott's is the more truly medieval; and the perfect close of Sir Roland's love-quest stands in admirable contrast to the hopeless muddle of medieval and modern with which Tennyson winds up his charming idyll on the love-quest of Sir Gareth. "Scott's feeling for romance," says one of the shrewdest of his later critics, and the depth of his sympathy with all that was heroic and much that

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was merely ancient, enabled him to assume almost the attitude of the wandering minstrel"; and in addition to the passage just noted a hundred others might be quoted to verify the truth of this assertion.

Scott's feeling for romance and sympathy with the heroic past came to him in the most natural way, through heredity and early environment. He was, to be sure, the son of a sedate and practical Edinburgh lawyer, but he was also the descendant of a famous hard-riding, hard-fighting clan, the sixth in right line from Walter of Harden, the hero of many a Border ballad, and his wife, the Flower of Yarrow — no bad genealogy, as Scott himself remarked with conscious pride, for a Border minstrel. He was born in what is still the most romantic of British towns, and his early years were spent with his grandparents in a farmhouse overlooking the Tweed, where he was brought up in an atmosphere of Jacobite tales and Border legends — an atmosphere

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wonderfully reproduced for us in the autobiographic lines prefixed to the third canto of *Marmion*. The first poem that he learned by heart was the ballad of *Hardyknut*, the first book that he read aloud was Pope's *Iliad*. While still a boy he read both Ossian and Spenser, and committed to memory long passages of the *Faerie Queene*. To a residence during his twelfth year in Kelso, "the most beautiful village in Scotland," Scott himself traced the awakening of his feeling for the beauties of nature, a feeling inextricably intertwined in him with a sense of the historic or legendary past of which these beauties were the frame. Scott was no pure nature-worshiper like Wordsworth; a landscape meant little or nothing to him unless it were associated with romantic memories. As he put it, very frankly, he would rather wander over the field of Bannockburn than survey the scene from the battlements of Stirling.

One of the most important incidents in

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Scott's early life was his acquaintance with Percy's ballad collection, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. It was not that the book opened a new field to the boy, for he had been familiar since infancy with ballads and legends; but it showed him that the collection, annotation, and imitation of these old songs was a pursuit worthy of a scholar and a gentleman. To Scott's first reading of the *Reliques* under a huge plantanus tree in the Kelso garden, oblivious of the flight of time and the pangs of hunger, may be traced his own great collection, the *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*; and the *Minstrelsy* laid the foundation for perhaps the greater portion of his later work.

Scott's schooling was limited and irregular. He declined to learn Greek, and provoked the wrath of his teacher by composing an argument to prove the superiority of Ariosto to Homer. He neglected the Latin classics to fasten eagerly upon the monkish chroniclers of the Middle Ages, and very properly preferred

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the *Stabat Mater* and the *Dies Iræ* to the neo-classic poems of the Renaissance. Outside of school hours he taught himself French and Italian, for the specific purpose of mastering the romantic treasures of those languages. He attended but few classes at the university, and although he studied hard and passed with credit his examinations for entrance to the Scottish bar, his heart was never in his profession. And yet his profession was of the greatest service to him, for it sent him wandering all over Scotland in pursuit of witnesses and testimony. He utilized these excursions to store his mind with images of romantic scenery and ruined castles and abbeys, with snatches of old songs and ballads, with anecdotes and legends of Highland chieftains and Border cattle-thieves. Before long he set himself diligently to collect the half-forgotten ballads of the Border-side, and his annual raids into Liddesdale not only secured him the treasures which he went to seek, but

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familiarized him with a mode of life which had changed but little since the old moss-trooping days. In after years Scott was accustomed to lament the idleness and irregular studies of his youth; but it is certain that no formal training could have fitted him half so well for the work he was to do, and all true Scott lovers will readily agree with Ruskin's charming paradox that the poet enjoyed "the blessing of a totally neglected education."

Scott's first contribution to literature was under the auspices of the new romantic school of Germany. He translated Bürger's ghostly ballads, *Lenore* and *The Wild Huntsman*, and Goethe's chivalric drama *Goetz von Berlichingen*. Proceeding to original composition he fell in with "Monk" Lewis, the recognized leader of the romantic movement in the highest circles of English society, and contributed to his *Tales of Wonder* a group of ballads, among them *Glenfinlas*, *The Eve of St. John*, and *The Fire-King*. Here we find



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the first true evidences of Scott's genius. The vigorous diction, lively rhythm, and picturesque imagery of these poems stand out in striking contrast to the tinsel and clap-trap of Lewis's own productions. And the strong sense of locality, the poetic use of proper names, and the mastery of supernatural effects which they exhibit were all true promises of greater things to come.

The *Minstrelsy*, Scott's next work, did not appear until three years later. The author's original intention had been to publish a neat little book, such as might sell for four or five shillings. But the work grew on his hands. In addition to his own stores of legend and ballad, Scott drew on the resources of such scholars as Ellis and Ritson, such countryside collectors and composers as Leyden and Hogg. The result was a three-volume collection, which is simply the best ballad-book in the world. Scott never hesitated to take liberties with his originals; he combined, altered, and

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inserted passages at will. He did all this, however, not to tickle the palate of a too fastidious public in Bishop Percy's fashion, but to bring the corrupt and imperfect versions up to his own standard of taste; and his taste in ballad literature was nothing short of the highest. He treated the ballads, in fact, not like a modern editor, but like an old minstrel; and as the last and greatest of the minstrels he brought many of them into their final and most perfect form.

And the prose of the book, the introduction, the essay on fairies, the voluminous historical and legendary notes, is only a little less delightful than the ballads. It contained the material for a hundred romances, and was the storehouse whence Scott drew uncounted names, scenes, and incidents for his later work. Years afterwards, when Scottish society was rent asunder over the authorship of the *Waverley* novels, Christopher North ridiculed the folly of those who went far afield to discover

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the writer. "What are they all thinking of?" said he; "have they forgotten the prose of the *Minstrelsy*?"

Scott began the composition of his first long poem, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, in the same year that saw the publication of his *Border Ballads*. He derived a hint for the subject from the young and beautiful wife of the nobleman who afterwards became Duke of Buccleuch, the famous title of the chief of the Scott clan. Scott has immortalized her as the Duchess of the introduction to the *Lay*, where he himself appears under the thin disguise of the aged minstrel. It would be impossible to find in modern times a situation more charmingly medieval. A young countess commands the minstrel of her house to sing, and even sets him a subject; the minstrel obeys, and weaves into his song the happiest of compliments to his gracious lady and the most delicate confession of his devotion and gratitude. And the song itself is such as a minstrel of the Middle

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ages might have sung, a metrical romance of chivalry. Like most of the old romances it is deficient in construction and overcharged with episode; but the episodes are too delightful to wish away, and in poems of this sort elaborate plot-construction is perhaps the last thing that matters.

The *Lay*, to quote Lockhart's fine phrase, is "a vivid panorama of that old Border life of war and tumult and all earnest passions." Love, war, religion, and magic are woven together into one imperishable fabric of romance, while at the same time the poet never wholly loses touch with the realities of life. William of Deloraine, Wat Tinlinn, the representatives of the English yeomanry, are veritable creatures of flesh and blood, and more than suffice to save the poem from drifting off into the dreamy land of Otherwhere, in which, for example, the scene of Coleridge's contemporary romance of *Christabel* is laid.

*Marmion*, the greatest of Scott's poems,

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appeared some three years after the *Lay*. It was composed for the most part in the saddle, during long rides over the braes or along the sands in the intervals of drilling with a volunteer regiment of cavalry. England was then in the full tide of her struggle against the gigantic power of Napoleon, and Scott, it is needless to say, threw himself into the struggle with all his heart. From it he caught more than a mere taste of

“That stern joy which warriors feel  
In foemen worthy of their steel.”

The poem itself breathes full of the mighty passion of the time. Alone of Scott's tales in verse it may with some fairness lay claim to the proud epithet of epic. Had the poet been fortunate enough at this period to light upon the theme that he took up later in the decay of his powers, the wars of Bruce, and had he developed that theme with the care which he acknowledges to have bestowed in unrivaled

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measure upon *Marmion*, we should perhaps have had what it now seems impossible that we shall ever see, a modern national epic poem. Even as it is, *Marmion* is many degrees above the *Lay* which precedes and *The Lady of the Lake* which follows it, in all that pertains to unity, dignity, and tragic force. The plot, though somewhat complicated, is a true plot and not a mere succession of incidents — it moves forward step by step; the fortunes of the principal figures are relieved against a well-planned background of history, and in the superb climax of the poem the fates of hero, heroine, and villain are involved in the overwhelming national catastrophe of Flodden. Words are too weak to praise the battlepiece with which the poem ends. It stands, along with the battles of the *Iliad* and the slaughter of the Nibelungs in Atli's Hall, as one of the three great poetic expressions of the fighting spirit in man, ancient, medieval, and modern.

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*The Lady of the Lake* is the most popular of Scott's poems, a fact due in large part, at least, to its happy choice of subjects. It is not too much to say that in this poem Scott opened to English readers a world entirely new, for the effusions of the pseudo-Ossian some fifty years before had been far too vague and intangible to give any conception of the life behind the Highland hills. Alien in blood and language as Scott was, he recognized in the dominating principle of this life, loyalty to the chief, one of the strongest of his own convictions; and, guided by this clue, he reconstructed and portrayed the customs and national characteristics of the Highlanders in a fashion that has been and will be the delight of generations. It was an astonishing *tour de force*, but, after all, it was little more. There is a faint flavor of artificiality about the poem; it is as if Scott's grasp on real life weakened when he deserted the narrow limits of his own peculiar land between Edinburgh and the Border. In story and in

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style *The Lady of the Lake* is the simplest, most polished, and most evenly sustained of all his poems; but if it never sinks so low, it never rises within striking distance of the loftiest flights of the *Lay* and *Marmion*, and some of its best passages are weakened by our sense that the same thing has been done and better done before. The Battle of Beal' an Duine is a long way behind Flodden. And yet when we hear that a Scotch officer in the Peninsular War read this battlepiece to his company lying exposed to the fire of the French guns, and that the men listened in breathless attention, only interrupting with a joyous hurrah as the shot struck the bank above their heads, we feel the utter futility of criticism. In poetry, as in sport or war, blood will tell, and the blood of generations of fighting men was warm in Scott's veins.

Space forbids any detailed consideration of the later poems. Yet, with the exception of the two dealing with contemporary events, and



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possibly the careless and ill-conceived romance *Harold the Dauntless*, they by no means deserve to be dismissed without a word. Something has already been said of *The Bridal of Triermain*. *The Lord of the Isles* contains at least one scene equal to the finest passages of the *Lay*, and many that are little below the level of *The Lady of the Lake*. *Rokeby*, of all Scott's poems, seems to me the most undeservedly neglected. Less fortunate in the choice of a subject than in any other of his romances, Scott has here laid his main stress upon characterization, and the chief figures in *Rokeby* are drawn with an attention to detail, and set off against each other in such effective contrast, as prepares us for the best work of his novels. Matilda, drawn from Scott's remembrance of his first love, is the most real of all the heroines of his poems; Redmond is by long odds the strongest of his heroes; and Bertram, the central figure of the whole romance, is the most superb portrait in Scott's collection of heroic

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villains. But the crowning glory of *Rokeby* is the lovely garland of lyrics which is so deftly interwoven with the action of the tale. Long after we have forgotten the descriptions and incidents of the poem, the gay lilt of the "Cavalier Song" and the tender cadences of "O, Brignall's banks," and "A weary lot is thine, fair maid," linger in our ears. The last-named song, indeed, seems to me the very quintessence of Scott's lyric gift.

It is hard to part from Scott. There is so much over which one would gladly pause: the mingled grace and strength of his elegiac moods, the frank simplicity of his occasional outbursts of self-revelation, the loving and minute detail of his bits of landscape-painting. But the purpose of this essay has been to explain and illustrate but one aspect of Scott's poetry, and to portray Scott himself as the last of the minstrels, the restorer to English literature of the well-nigh forgotten medieval forms of the ballad and the metrical romance, the in-

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spired awakener of an undying interest in the legendary and chivalric past, the golden link that binds us to the middle ages. And this purpose it may be hoped has been, in some measure, already accomplished.

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IT was the fashion some time ago to speak with a certain easy contempt of the late-won popularity of Browning's verse, to make small jokes about the labors of the Browning Society, and to prophesy that the popularity and the Society alike were a mere fad which would hardly outlive the poet himself. Browning has been dead some fifteen years; the Browning Society soon followed him to the grave; the fad, if fad it were, of assuming a peculiar position in the world of culture by exclusive and esoteric devotion to his poems, has also passed away. And yet Browning remains as popular as ever. Perhaps more so. Not only is his rank as one of the greater Victorian poets tacitly admitted,—a fact which was by no

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means apparent when Mr. Stedman's well-known review of the poetry of that age appeared in 1887 — but he is constantly quoted or alluded to in such a way as to show that this rank is not an empty honor conferred upon the illustrious dead, but rather the recognition of his permeating influence upon the present time. And there are other proofs of Browning's hold upon the public. Editions of his works are rapidly multiplying. His earlier poems, in particular, as they pass out of copyright, are being reproduced in cheap and attractive forms; and since the appearance of Mrs. Browning's *Letters* in the closing years of the last century there has been a steady succession of books about the poet, which has culminated this present year in Professor Dowden's thoughtful and illuminating "biography of the poet's mind," perhaps the most valuable contribution to our knowledge of the man and his work that has yet been made. Decidedly Browning is not dead yet.

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“No need that sort of king should ever die,” says one of the characters in *Pippa Passes*, and so may we say of Browning. The quality most characteristic of the man, from his impetuous and eager youth to his magnificent old age, was energy, activity, vitality of body and mind.

There was discernible in him, indeed, a certain restless activity. He could not sit long over a book; he would not spend his time in the slow labor of the file that brings forth at last the perfect line. He needed to the very end of his life some outlet for his superabundant physical energies. And so he rode for hours, walked for miles, swam far out into the sea, bathed in mountain brooks, modeled in clay; — any occupation was welcome that gave his powers play. And his mind was as active as his body. If he did not read long, he read swiftly and widely, and assimilated instantly what once he read. If he did not meditate profoundly, he thought vehemently, springing

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with lightning bounds over the processes of reason to the goal of truth. He was insatiable in his thirst for acquisition and enjoyment. He tasted all the pleasures of travel, society, art, and music. He drank deep of the cup of love. But he was not content with mere enjoyment. Whatever he touched he sought to master and understand. Like his own Fra Lippo, the world meant intensely to him, and to find its meaning was his meat and drink. There is no poet in our literature who shows in so abundant measure the presence of this element of intellectual curiosity.

And the same vitality that characterized the man marks his work as well. There are many faults in Browning, faults of omission and commission, rough places, ugly spots, offences to eye and ear. But there is one fault with which his severest critic cannot charge him. He is never dull. The wine he pours is not always sweet, but it is never flat or vapid. It has always a certain keen smack and pun-

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gent aroma which assures us that the poet's spirit is still there.

Browning's parents were quiet bourgeois people, but each of them furnished something of the matter which, touched by the spark of genius, broke out into flower in the poet. His father, denied the artistic and the classical education for which he had longed in youth, was a clerk in the Bank of England, a self-taught scholar, a prodigious reader, and an indefatigable book hunter. "His brain," said his son in after years, "was a storehouse of literary and philosophical antiquities." He was fond of poetry and art, and himself wrote verses, and drew, cleverly enough, portraits and caricatures. He possessed robust health and a fund of simple, unworldly affection for wife, children, and friends. The poet's mother, slight, delicate, and high-strung, was, in Carlyle's phrase, "the true type of a Scottish gentlewoman." Her son's affection for her was deep and lasting. Through all the years of his



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life as a young bachelor in his parents' house he never went to bed without going into her room to kiss her good-night, and at her death, which happened while he was away at Florence, his wife wrote: "Robert has loved his mother as such passionate natures only can love, and I never saw a man so bowed down in such extremity of sorrow — never." Both husband and wife were devout Christians of the simple, old-fashioned type, members of an Independent congregation in a London suburb, evangelical, rather than sacerdotal or ascetic.

Browning's education was peculiar. He left school in his fourteenth year, and never went to college, unless a brief attendance on a Greek class in London University may be reckoned such. But his home training was excellent. He cultivated the body, learnt to ride, box, dance, and fence; devoted much time to music; and under his father's guidance read omnivorously, English, French, Latin, and Greek. There is little reason to share, I think, his

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official biographer's regret that Browning missed the conventional English course of instruction.

Like most poets Browning was a precocious boy. He read Pope's *Homer* with keen delight at the age of eight, plunged headlong into Byron at ten, and in his twelfth year produced a volume of verses of the true Byronic stamp, in which we are told, "he yearned for wastes of ocean and illimitable sands, for dark eyes and burning caresses, for despair that nothing would quench but the silent grave, and, in particular, for hollow, mocking laughter." It is needless to say that no publisher shared the proud parents' opinion of this early work, and it is characteristic of Browning that, as soon as he came to years of discretion, he destroyed the manuscript.

While Browning was still a boy, however, he came under a nobler and more permanent influence than that of Byron. A pretty story is told of his discovery in a suburban bookstall

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of a copy of "Mr. Shelley's Atheistical Poem," *Queen Mab*; of his mother's sympathy with her boy's new interest, of her presentation of an armful of volumes by Mr. Shelley and his friend Mr. Keats; and of the boy's rapturous communion through a summer night, while nightingales sang in the garden, with the souls of poets dead and gone. To the end of his life Browning never forgot that night; he often spoke of it as "his first joy, his first free happiness in outlook." And well might he remember it, for the soul of the poet was born in him that night.

And it was not long before he definitely decided to devote his life to poetry. With the full consent of his father, who seems to have entertained the same well-founded confidence in his son's genius that Milton's father did, Browning declined to enter business or prepare for a profession, and set himself to study life, and to cultivate his powers for his future work. His first actual production, it must be owned,

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was somewhat disappointing. *Pauline*, a long, monodramatic poem, intended to serve as the introduction to a series of similar epics, "narratives of the lives of typical souls," was written before Browning was twenty-one, and appeared anonymously in 1833. It attracted almost no attention, and in spite of certain passages of a wild, vague beauty, contained little of true promise. For its very beauties were but faint echoes from Shelley. The portrait of the nameless hero is shadowy and obscure; that of the lady of the poem is, perhaps, even less perceptible. Browning himself realized his lack of "good draughtsmanship and right handling," and in later years acknowledged and retained the piece among his collected works with extreme reluctance.

It is another matter with Browning's next work. *Paracelsus*, published in 1835, is a creation which any poet might be proud to own. Coming from the hand of a youth of twenty-three, it amazes us, not so much by its

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eloquence and beauty as by its strength of thought, its grasp on life, its revealed mastery of poetic conception and execution. The portrait of Paracelsus, the first in Browning's long gallery of heroes who strove and failed and wrested victory out of defeat, is lifelike and convincing. Such and no otherwise we must believe the real man to have been. And the central theme of the poem reveals with an intense simplicity seldom matched thereafter in Browning's work what was to be the cardinal point of his philosophy of life,—the necessity of human striving, undismayed by weakness, ignorance, and failure, sustained and cheered by love and sympathy, upward toward the ideal of humanity, which is none other than God himself.

It is a long step backward from *Paracelsus* to *Sordello*, which closes the first period of Browning's work. In fact it appeared at one time as if the publication of this unlucky poem had forever closed the gates against Browning's

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favor with the English public. The stories that are told of its reception by Carlyle, who declared that his wife had read it through without being able to discover whether *Sordello* were the name of a man, a city, or a book; by Tennyson, who declared that he had understood but two lines, the first and last, and that both these were lies; and by Douglas Jerrold, who saw in his utter inability to make sense of the poem a symptom of incipient idiocy, and was only rescued from despair by his wife's frank assertion that it was the poet and not the reader who was mad; — these stories but faintly illustrate the dumb amazement with which the public in general received the book. And even to-day a not wholly dissimilar effect is produced upon the reader who approaches the poem for the first time, equipped though he may be with the whole armory of guides, hand-books, and commentaries which have gathered round this portentous work of Browning's youth. The truth is that *Sordello*, though

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by no means so obscure or illegible as tradition gives out, is a work of extreme difficulty. The style is condensed, abrupt, and allusive to a degree, — “Greek written in shorthand,” some one has called it. The main theme, “incidents in the development of a soul,” on which Browning meant to lay stress, is too often buried from sight in a multitude of details gathered from his historical studies and his recent Italian travels. Only an utter lack of the critical instinct could have persuaded Browning into the belief he is said to have entertained that this unwieldy narrative would be intelligible, even in its main outlines, to the average reader. But Browning had at all times of his life far more of the creative impulse than of the critical instinct.

Browning’s second period of work overlaps his first, and coincides with the introduction to society and the world of letters which the success of *Paracelsus*, limited as this success was, had won for him. He was at this time a

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tall, dark, handsome youth, something of a dandy in dress, vivacious and friendly in manner. He was eager to wring from the world all that it had to offer one fresh from so secluded a boyhood, and gladly cultivated the friendships with poets, actors and men of letters whom this new-found world revealed to him. It was at the suggestion of one of these new friends, the great actor, Macready, that Browning in 1836 laid aside his half-finished *Sordello* and began the first of his series of plays.

Luckily one need spend little time nowadays in threshing over the straw of that once hotly debated question whether or not Browning was a dramatist. If by the word dramatist we mean what the word has meant from the time of Æschylus to the time of Ibsen, a writer of plays for the stage, Browning has small claim to the title. It is quite true that several of his plays were actually performed and that none of these positively failed. As



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to the exact measure of success attained by *Strafford*, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, or *Colombe's Birthday*, we may, I think, remain wholly and calmly indifferent. Indeed, it may well be a matter of congratulation to us that their success was not more decided, and that Browning escaped a permanent entanglement with so effete and moribund an institution as the Victorian theater. His failure as a practical playwright, for failure in view of all the circumstances it must be called, threw him back upon his own proper field, that drama "whose stage," to quote the admirable phrase of a French critic, "is the soul itself and whose actors are the passions."

The dramatic quality in Browning consists, to put it briefly, in his objectivity, in his power to conceive other characters than his own, in his ability to make these characters reveal themselves by thought and word and action. And this second period of Browning's work, in sharp distinction to his first, is pre-eminently

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objective. Exclusive of *Sordello*, a poem begun and in part completed before Browning began his work for the stage, this period embraces his productions from 1837 to 1846. It includes *Strafford*, and the seven plays and two clusters of dramatic lyrics and romances which go to make up the series of *Bells and Pomegranates*. In all these it is hard to find a single direct and personal utterance of the poet such as occurs so often in his earliest work. It is as if Browning had felt the inadequacy of the material on which he had hitherto built up his theory of life, and now flung himself upon the world to gather new facts, create new characters, invent new tests, and thus equip himself by experimental knowledge of human life for the pronouncement of a riper and juster judgment. And what a wealth of new material the poet brought back from this raid upon objective existence. To this period belong Pippa and her songs, the superb and sensual *Ottima*, the gracious charm of Co-

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lombe, the innocent guiltiness of Mildred and Mertoun, the noble faith of Luria.

Apart from the creation of character in his dramas Browning discovered in this period the peculiar form of verse in which his most characteristic work hereafter was to be framed, the dramatic monologue; and his first employment of this form, *My Last Duchess*, shows how instantly he realized its possibilities. Humor, a quality hitherto unknown in Browning, shows itself in such work as *The Pied Piper*, *Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis*, and *The Flight of the Duchess*. Passion, too, makes its appearance, the passion of friendship in *Time's Revenues*, of hatred in the *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*, of love in *Cristina* and *In a Gondola*.

As one glances back over the period as a whole, one gets somehow the impression of a genial young giant broken loose upon the world and venting his glorious strength, not in destruction, but in reproduction, in imitation, in caricature, even, of the multiform types of

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humanity that he encountered there. And as a whole this period of vigorous objective work, so packed with vivid portraiture, so alive with human passion, represents an immeasurable advance upon the incoherent beauties of *Pauline*, the confused entanglement of *Sordello*, or even the eloquent philosophy of *Paracelsus*. Yet all this work, fresh, strong, and vital as it appears to us, was thrown away upon a public deaf and blind. The *Bells and Pomegranates*, published though they were in cheap yellow-paper-covered booklets, found few readers and almost no purchasers. One only of the numbers achieved the grace of a second edition, *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*; and this distinction was due, one fears, not to any popular appreciation of its merits, but in part to the comparative success it had obtained upon the stage, and in part to the notoriety of the bitter quarrel between playwright and actor which accompanied its production.

Browning had, however, already gained one

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reader whose praise in after years was to outweigh for him the plaudits of a listening world. Elizabeth Barrett, a far more popular poet in the early forties than Browning, was at the time of their first acquaintance a hopeless invalid, hopeless at least in her own opinion and in that of those who knew her best. But her spirit triumphed serenely over her bodily sufferings. Invalid as she was, her life was very full. She read, wrote, translated, received a few intimates in the little room where she spent day after day upon her sofa, and kept in close touch with all the movements of the time. Browning, "the author of *Paracelsus* and king of the mystics," as she called him, she had long known in his works, and she had conceived the highest opinion of his present worth and his promise for the future. The noble compliment which she paid in her *Poems* of 1844 to his *Bells and Pomegranates* brought her a letter from him full of thanks and enthusiastic praise of her work. Her reply opened the way

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to an animated and intimate correspondence, and after some months Browning received permission to visit her. On a former occasion she had, indeed, declined to receive him. "There is nothing to see in me," she said, "nothing to hear in me. I am a weed fit for the ground and darkness." But Browning saw in her a flower that needed only the sunlight of love to break out into full bloom, and this love he brought with him. It is characteristic of the impetuous vigor of the man that his first visit to the woman whom he thought, as he confessed afterwards, to be suffering from some incurable disease, was promptly followed by a letter containing an offer of marriage. Miss Barrett was greatly shocked, and forbade further advance upon penalty of forfeiting her friendship. With a lover's craft Browning bowed to her decision, obtained the return of the offending letter, and straightway burned it,—to the deep grief in after days of his wife, who had treasured up every other word he ever wrote her.

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Their intercourse began again, and before long the poetess, longing with all the strength of her passionate woman's heart for love, found herself unable to put away the cup of life which her poet-lover quietly but with steadfast devotion held to her lips. The story of their courtship has recently been given to the world by the publication of the letters that passed between them in these months. A great hue and cry was raised at the time over the publication of these letters, as if in some way the sanctities of private life had thereby been profaned. But as a matter of fact, there is little or nothing in them except the prose version of what Mrs. Browning herself, with her husband's consent and at his desire, had long since given to the world in the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. These sonnets are in every detail autobiographical, and quite apart from their extraordinary worth as pure poetry, they are a contribution to the psychology of love such as has seldom been equaled. They form a perfect sequence

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from his first proffer of love and her refusal through a trembling symphony of doubts and fears and hopes to the harmonious closing chords of her final surrender and avowal:

“I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
With my lost saints — I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all this life — and if God choose,  
I shall but love thee better after death.”

One obstacle alone stood in the way of their happiness. Mr. Barrett was apparently the perfect type of that hard-hearted father who, fortunately for the world, is so much commoner in fiction than in real life. He was by no means an unkind parent, but his theory of paternal government seems to have been that he should oblige his children in small things and they should obey him in all things. All thought of marriage, in particular, on the part of any of his daughters he resisted with an almost insane violence of speech and gesture. He had no special dislike to Browning, “the pomegranate man,” as he called him; but when it was



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hinted to him that his invalid daughter, now visibly gaining in health and strength, might some day be looking for a husband, he replied that she ought to be thinking of another world. Miss Barrett confessed herself physically unable to endure the outbreak that would inevitably follow the announcement of her purpose; and at her desire the marriage was secret. Within a week afterwards she left her home never to return. Her father considered her action as little short of an unnatural crime; he never saw her again, left her letters unopened, and went to his grave unforgiving.

Apart from the passing shadow which her father's harshness threw upon them, the married happiness of the Brownings was unbroken. They lived for the most part in Florence, making occasional excursions to Rome and Paris, and visiting England at intervals in the summer. They saw little of society in the ordinary sense of the word; but Story, Hawthorne, George Sand, Mazzini, Landor, Rossetti, Carlyle,

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and Tennyson were among their acquaintances and friends. Mrs. Browning continued to improve in health and strength till it seemed that little short of a miracle had been wrought upon her. All credit for the miracle she at least gave her husband. "He has done everything for me," she wrote a friend; "he loved me for reasons which had helped to weary me of myself, drew me back to life and hope when I had done with both. . . . The intellect is so little in comparison with all the rest, the womanly tenderness, the inexhaustible goodness, the high and noble aspiration of every hour." Browning on his part regarded her as the inspiration of his life. "By gift of her," he says, "God best taught song." She is his "angel," his "moon of poets," his

"Lyric love, half angel and half bird,  
And all a wonder and a wild desire."

It is her face that he expects to see at the last breaking through the clouds of death; it is she

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who in the next world will see and make him see "new depths of the divine."

Their married life was perhaps too happy to last long upon this earth. Mrs. Browning's eager and sensitive temperament at last wore through its tenement of clay. In 1861, sixteen years after their marriage, she died suddenly in her husband's arms, "smilingly, happily, with a face like a girl's." "There was no lingering nor acute pain nor consciousness of separation," he wrote a friend, "but God took her to himself as you would lift a sleeping child out of a dark, uneasy bed into your arms and the light."

The influence of these happy years of intimate association with a spirit at once so lofty and so tender as his wife's is unmistakable upon the poet's work. Browning's third period begins with the twin-poems of *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, published some four years after his marriage, and closes in 1868 with the late completion of the work which he

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had meditated and perhaps roughly sketched out before his wife's death, *The Ring and the Book*. In a sense this period is a continuation of the second. It is, in the main, a period of objective work, of character creation. And as such it contains Browning's finest work. Nothing that he did before or after can compare with the figures of Fra Lippo and Andrea del Sarto, with Bishop Blougram and Mr. Sludge, with the immortal three of *The Ring and the Book*, Guido, Pompilia, and Giuseppe Caponsacchi. But the period is by no means one of pure objectivity. The poet interprets as well as creates. He creates, indeed, often for the sake of interpretation. The figures of Caliban, for example, and of the dying apostle whom Jesus loved, were drawn not for any mere æsthetic delight in realizing a poetic concept, though this, too, no doubt, enters into the work, but primarily to serve as mouth-pieces of Browning's ideas on religion, what religion must be when it looks up to an all-

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powerful but loveless God, what religion may be when it centres in a God of love. How immensely Browning's interest in religion increased in this period may readily be ascertained by comparing the unfinished *Saul* of the *Bells and Pomegranates* with the superb conclusion added ten years later in *Men and Women*.

And when one speaks of religion in connection with Browning one means neither more nor less than Christianity. To discuss the exact degree of Browning's orthodoxy, to examine whether at all times he accepted implicitly each separate dogma of revealed religion, is of course impossible in such a sketch as this. It is sufficient for us to know that at this central period of his life, this period of his greatest and most enduring creative work, he held fast to the central doctrine of Christianity, the revelation of God's love for man in the God-man, Christ. This doctrine is the theme of poem after poem, of *Saul*, of *Karshish*, of *A*

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*Death in the Desert*; rejected, Browning seems to teach, it leaves human life as sadly insoluble a puzzle as it was to Cleon; accepted it transfigures human life with the glory which hung about the death-bed of St. John. And if it be objected that such poems are dramatic in nature, that the words of David or Karshish do not express the beliefs of Browning, the simple answer is that no one but a believer in this doctrine would, or could, have treated it so often with such intense interest and with such evident sympathy. And if further answer were needed, the first poem of this period, *Christmas Eve*, proclaims Browning's personal belief in the divinity of Christ in the frankest fashion, and rejects absolutely the modern notion that the "secret of Jesus" consists in the "sweet reasonableness" of his moral teachings. It is only a biased, and, to my mind, a wilfully blinded criticism which can see in the speaker of this poem any other than the poet himself.

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Indeed, this reappearance of the personal, subjective note might well be called the element which distinguishes the work of Browning's third period from that which immediately preceded it. It is not on the topic of religion alone that he speaks out. On art, and its significance in human life, on love, and its power in the releasing of the soul, his utterance is quite as direct. Such personal speech as appears in *Old Pictures in Florence*, and *One Word More*; such slightly veiled expression of his thought as appears in *Abt Vogler*, and *Evelyn Hope*, would have been impossible to his mood of a few years earlier.

It is hardly to be doubted, I think, that it was the influence of his wife, whose own genius was distinctly lyrical and subjective, that led to this freer expression of his own "hopes and fears, beliefs and disbelieving." Early in their correspondence Miss Barrett had urged Browning to speak out in his own person; and he had replied that whereas he had hitherto

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only made men and women utter themselves on his behalf, he would now try to declare directly what was in him; "only," he added, "I don't think I shall let you hear, after all, the savage things about Popes and imaginative religions that I must say." That these savage things were never said, may well be another tribute to Mrs. Browning's influence.

Browning had nearly thirty years of life before him when his wife died, and after the first convulsive agony of grief he set himself to live them resolutely and well. For a time, indeed, it was a mere chance whether he should go away to some quiet retreat and be seen no more. But Browning's vitality was too red-blooded for any such cloistered seclusion, and two years after his wife's death he deliberately entered society again, pronouncing the retired life he had led since her death morbid and unworthy. From this time on as long as his bodily strength permitted, Browning was, in the best sense, a man of the world. He ac-



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cepted every suitable invitation, he was seen at every public function. He appeared at first nights in the theater, never missed a Patti or Joachim concert, a private view or annual exhibition. The magnificent success of *The Ring and the Book* finally established his fame as a poet, and he became a lion of the salons in London and Paris. Frankly enough he lived and liked life's way. But though in the world he was not of it. Amid a materialistic, pleasure-loving, and skeptical society, he remained always the same earnest thinker and bold speaker, a champion of the ideal, an apologist for the eternal verities. He seemed to his friends to have the secret of perennial youth, for he went unwearied through the arduous London seasons, and in holidays on the Breton coast or among the Alps swam, rode, and walked with all the zest and vigor of a youth. Something of this joyous energy of youth surviving in old age shows itself in his latest poems. To the last there remains the same

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keen interest in life, the same desire to gather objective facts and interpret them. The same quick sensitiveness to beauty that marks *Pauline* appears in the *Parleyings*, and the passionate love-poems scattered through *Ferishtah's Fancies* and *Asolando* were written by a white-haired man of almost eighty.

Browning by no means neglected his proper calling during this busy period of his life in society. He wrote vigorously and without interruption. Indeed, one may venture the assertion that he wrote too much. Nine volumes in eight years, which was his record between 1871 and 1878, must be a strain upon the strongest powers. One has the feeling in looking over the work of these years that Browning had perfected his method, wrote easily and swiftly, and cared little what he wrote so long as he was occupied. If this were so, it is not surprising that the quality of his work suffered as the quantity increased. There is an excess of intellectual subtlety, of psychological analysis,

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a deficiency of his former directness of speech and positive creative power. He neglected almost entirely his old form of the short dramatic monologue, and wrote long argumentative or narrative poems such as *Fifine at the Fair* or *Red Cotton Night-cap Country*. One may read these poems with interest, but hardly with real pleasure, and the temptation to return to them is assuredly not very strong. It is fortunate for Browning's fame that he passed out of this period toward the close of the seventies, and entered upon a St. Martin's summer of production which includes some of his most delightful work. It may be that the shock inflicted upon him in 1877 by the sudden death of a dear friend led to his abandoning the practise of intellectual casuistry. In the dark hours that followed he probed the inmost recesses of his soul to obtain a truthful answer to the question whether this earthly life were all that man could hope for. And having obtained his answer, he ceased to play with the

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false, and again devoted himself to the study of the true. It may be, too, that the decline of his bodily powers, imperceptible, indeed, even to himself, but no less real, indisposed him to the effort of long and sustained composition. The fact remains that the quantity of verse published by Browning during the last ten years of his life is less than half of what he wrote in the preceding decade. And this verse consists for the most part of brief dramatic narratives marked by a strong and impressive realism, of lyrics instinct with strange and poignant charm, and, in one volume, at least, of parables in which Browning drapes his philosophy of life with the cloak of Oriental wisdom in the mouth of the dervish-teacher, Ferishtah.

The last months of Browning's life were spent in Italy, at Asolo, the little hill-town he had fallen in love with fifty years before, and in his son's Venetian palace. Old as he was he still preserved his habit of vigorous action,

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and his enjoyment of the charm of Italian life and scenery. He walked among the mountains or along the Lido, explored the obscurest *calli* of Venice, and feasted his eyes on the gorgeous pageants of Italian sunrise and sunset. "Every morning at six I see the sun rise," he wrote not long before his death. "My bedroom window commands a perfect view: the still gray lagune, the few sea-gulls flying, the islet of St. Giorgio in deep shadow, and the clouds in a long purple rack, behind which a sort of spirit of rose burns up till presently all the rims are on fire with gold, and last of all the orb sends before it a long column of its own essence apparently: so my day begins."

But even while he enjoyed the present and looked forward with happy anticipation to future work, his strength was waning. A bronchial attack revealed some hitherto unsuspected weakness of the heart's action, and on December 12, 1889, the very day

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on which his last volume of verse was published, Browning passed quietly and painlessly out of life. He was honored with a magnificent public funeral in Venice, and his body was conveyed to England to its final resting-place in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey, close by the tomb of Chaucer, and near the spot where his friend and noble rival in the race for fame, Alfred Tennyson, was laid away some three years later. The solemn splendor of his burial was a fitting tribute from the nation that had so long denied and so late accepted his claims as a poet and teacher.

It is as a poet, I think, rather than as a teacher, that Browning will live. Or, perhaps, one should rather say that he will live as a teacher because he was, first of all, a poet. Part of his work, a large part, perhaps, is destined to the oblivion of the collected edition and the upper shelf — no unusual fate for poets who have written so much as he. What will live is that portion in which, forgetting for

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the time his desire to teach, he has set himself to create character and to express emotion. It is as certain as any literary prophecy can be that *Fra Lippo* and *Abt Vogler* will be read long years after *La Sasiaz* and the *Parleyings* are forgotten.

The elements which give to Browning's poetry this assured vitality may, I think, be briefly summed up under three heads. There is, first, his extraordinary grasp upon reality. Browning is not a poet of dreams and vague desires and empty aspirations. He deals by preference with the common aspects of earth and the common passions of mankind. He has nothing of Shelley's "desire of the moth for the star"; on the contrary he shares to the full the great movement toward realism in literature which succeeded the romantic period of the early nineteenth century. From this realism springs not only his power of vivid description, but his humor, and his fondness for the grotesque. He saw things as they were

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and loved them so. And it is this quality, I think, which gives his work body and fulness.

Closely connected with this quality is another which we may call his humanity, his wide sympathy with all forms of human life:

“Man’s thoughts, and loves, and hates,  
Earth is my vineyard, these grew there.”

It is by virtue of this sympathy that he was able to enter into souls so different from his own and from one another as Guido, Giuseppe, Cleon, and Johannes Agricola. And having entered into them and understood them, he was able to reveal them to the world. Browning’s greatest gift to literature consists in the men and women that he has created. No English poet since Shakespeare has possessed this creative power to Browning’s degree, and it is just this power which constitutes his essential claim to the title of poet, or maker, and which gives his work its warmth and color.

Finally, Browning’s vitality is assured by his buoyant and undaunted optimism. In its strug-



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gle upward against the powers of evil mankind cannot afford to reject the aid of so strong and fearless a fighter as Browning proved himself. A poet who can hope in the Paris morgue is an ally not to be despised. It makes little difference in the last result whether this optimism was a matter of temperament or based upon rational principles. As a matter of fact both temperament and reason combined in Browning's optimism. His vigorous and happy nature forbade him to succumb to the evil that he saw and plainly recognized around him. His keen and powerful intellect compelled him to find assurance for his instinctive hope of victory. And he found this assurance in the existence, amid all the world's evil and misery, of love.

“There is no good in life but love, but love!  
What else looks good is some shade flung from  
love,  
Love gilds it, gives it worth,”

says the hero of *In a Balcony*, echoing a thought that recurs repeatedly in Browning's work.

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And since love is the best thing that the mind can apprehend in the world, it follows that God — and Browning was as sure of God as he was of the world — must be a God of love. And from the idea of a God of love springs the faith in immortality without which human life becomes a miserable mystery. And the faith in immortality once accepted transforms human life into a period of probation in which pain and sorrow and evil itself may be cheerfully accepted as necessary instruments in the shaping of the soul for its proper life hereafter. The belief in immortality was not so much a religious dogma as a habit of mind with Browning; it seemed impossible for him to view the world except, as it were, *sub specie æternitatis*. This belief inspired much of his loftiest and strongest verse; and the optimism which sprang from this belief gives his work as a whole its strengthening and elevating power.

The epilogue to *Asolando* contains the por-

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trait that Browning drew of himself as he looked back over the crowded years of his long life. Reading the proof of this last poem one night shortly before his death, he hesitated and said to the friends who were sitting by him: "It almost looks like bragging to say this, and as if I ought to cancel it; but it's the simple truth; and as it's true, it shall stand." It might well stand as his epitaph, and it will serve fitly as a conclusion to this essay. Browning's work, as I have tried to show, shares something of the poet's vitality. And Browning was, and knew himself to be,

"One who never turned his back but marched  
breast forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were worsted,  
wrong would triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake."









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